Finding Solace

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by Ocean_Adjacent

Summary

"The alpha set the mug down in front of Max, and took his own bowl when Isaac offered it. Max stared at the steaming mug a moment too long—it was blue with white speckles, a chip in the handle—before he forced his eyes back down to his folded hands. As tests went, this one was obvious."

A continuation of "Seeking Shelter" by sphagnum, opening from Max's first morning with the pack, because be the sequel you want to see in the world.

Notes

I definitely suggest reading the original fic first, if you've somehow come here without seeing it. The cliff notes are, post-pandemic, an omega on the edge of starvation throws himself on the mercy of a pack of ex-military men on some sort of road trip in a post-apocalyptic, collapse environment. The virus impacted his brain, so he can't understand anyone, and when he speaks it becomes garbled and no one can understand him. He thinks he's going to be abused and that's just the price he has to pay for food, but they take care of him.

Content notes: much like the original fic, there is no sex of any variety in this story.* We're here for the ~feelings,~ but those feelings touch on some of Max's past nonconsensual experiences, and his current anxiety over being at the mercy of people he doesn't yet understand are decent. I don't think it's all that graphic but let me know if I should tag differently. I copied most of the tags from the original work.

Update, this is now a multi-part work, and some of the later parts include sexual content. There is no sexual content in this first chapter. Tags updated accordingly!

- Inspired by Seeking Shelter by sphagnum

Chapter 1

The first sensation to filter through to Max's consciousness, was the warmth. When was the last time he was warm like this? Summer, probably. When the heat could be stifling, a clinging sweat that never went away even after dark. This wasn't that, though. The air now was slightly chilled on his exposed face, air tinged with the scents of—

Alpha. Stranger-alpha, on Max's own neck. Scent-marked, the other man's pheromones were overwhelming now that Max was waking up. The warmth on either side of him was because he was sandwiched between two men, their breathing sleep-even and gently ruffling his hair.

The pack. That was right—he gave himself to this pack, last night. And they didn't shoot him, didn't even fuck him yet. They fed him. Max, careful to be still, moved his tongue around his mouth a little. Pushed at the inside of his teeth, the roof of his mouth, as he relived the sensation. His stomach was empty again now, but even if it took him another few days to earn more food from them, he knew he'd get it, and he knew he'd survive until then. At some point Max had read that a person can die from lack of salt, and he'd been worried, about the salt. He didn't know enough about nutrition to know what else in particular to worry about, but he knew he was starving. But there'd been salt in the broth.

He tried to make himself relax, against the tangled bodies around him. He didn't have to worry anymore—or, more accurately, worrying was no longer connected to any actions he could take to protect himself, and it would be better to shut that level of thinking all the way off. That's what it meant, to be part of a pack. That was the deal he had made: giving up on his ability to choose, in exchange for staying alive. The last real decision he was ever going to make, had been to put down his knife.

In bed between the two leaders of this pack, he tried to convince himself that it was a good decision. He might be the lowest rung on the ladder here, and it might take awhile for him to earn his place, but he'd done enough due diligence to think that it would be survivable. Nick and the other alpha, the man with the sandy hair, they didn't knock around the others for fun, or go out of their way to enforce their status. Neither did the betas. They didn't need to: from what he'd seen in his four days of spying, everyone here simply…got along. Max could get along. Max wasn't going to give them a reason to hurt him, so they wouldn't. They wouldn't, even though they could. Even though it would be so easy. Even though Max couldn't possibly stop them.

He was trying to control his breathing and heart rate, trying to keep his scent calm, but then the alpha—Nick, Max had to be thinking of them by their names—shifted against him. One leg over where Max's feet were entwined with Isaac's, and then Nick's erection was pressing into Max's belly.

He'd been doing such a good job of keeping under control, but the truth of it shouldered its way between his thoughts: it was going to hurt.

He shouldn't bother worrying about it, he knew that. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, for him to do about it, and so it didn't bear thinking about. He just needed to—he needed to turn off this humming fear, and just be good.

Saying it to himself wasn't particularly helpful, though. And the elephant in the room was all that much harder to ignore, when it was right up against him. Max tried to pace his breathing, but his fear rose until he could smell it.

Isaac . On the far end of the bed, the skittish omega was stirring. *Isaac* . When he gently shook Isaac's shoulder, Max and Nick were jostled, too.

Nick snapped into awareness first, pulling back from being half-on top of Max to push himself up on one arm. His dark brown eyes locked onto Max's for a moment, before Max hurriedly averted his gaze. He turned his face into where Isaac's arm was beneath his head and dropped his own shoulder, exposing the length of his neck. Submission, but with the benefit of hiding his expression. Hiding against the warm umber of Isaac's skin, where it still smelled safe and he could close his eyes and brace himself.

New kid freaking out? Nick's tone didn't sound pissed, at least.

New kid freaking out. Sorry, I was trying to wake Isaac. And the skittish omega didn't sound afraid at having woken their alpha, so that was something.

You don't have to apologize. Are you good, yourself?

Yeah, I'm good.

Max started slightly, when Nick's fingers came to the side of his neck. They felt for his pulse, and then started to stroke along the bare skin, making light, soothing passes from Max's jaw to his collarbone and back. *Hey, Max. Sorry to have spooked you. We were sleeping real close there, I know. But you're alright, aren't you? Nobody's going to do anything to you, I promise.*

Who's doing what? Isaac stirred beneath Max. Max could hear the intake of breath as he scented the air. *What's wrong?*

Probably a long list of things, and we can't clear any of it up with a simple conversation. I want somebody to be within arm's reach of him, at all times.

Aw, sweetheart. Isaac shifted, and Nick pulled back. Isaac brushed a kiss against Max's temple, his voice cheery and sympathetic. *Can't say I've always been thrilled about it either, whenever I've woken up in bed with strangers. But then, I usually had the hangover to tip me off as to how I got there.*

Nick scoffed, but it wasn't disparaging. *Arm's reach, and all weapons secured. I don't want him getting ahold of so much as a cooking knife.*

Are we gonna do some dumb shit? Nah, we're not gonna do any dumb shit, are we, Max? Isaac stretched, wiggling a little bit. *We're gonna get dressed, and have breakfast, and then hit the road. And it's all gonna be real chill, you'll see.*

Between their soft voices and gentle touch, Max had relaxed a little bit, but he tensed back up as the mattress shifted again. Even with his face hidden, he screwed his eyes shut, because however soft they were being with him, Nick was going to choose one of them to satisfy himself this morning, and Max knew he was the shiny new prospect.

I'll grab him some warm gear. Hey, Max, we've got some stuff in this bin, you want to come look? The second omega was moving off the bed first, and Max wondered how he knew he was dismissed. Then Isaac pushed the covers down, and sat up slowly with a yawn, prompting Max to uncurl and sit up as well.

Isaac smiled at him, and made a little shooing gesture. Max didn't need to be told twice, and scrambled off the bed after the second omega.

Max got halfway through thinking that maybe taking care of Nick was always Isaac's job in the morning, but Nick was following them, too.

The second omega hadn't gone very far—there was a shelving unit just past the doorway to the bedroom, with three large plastic storage tubs. He pulled the red one halfway out, which had the effect of trapping himself and Max in the little hallway, with Nick behind them. Max couldn't help turning to put his back to the wall, flickering his eyes to check Nick's expression and posture. The alpha wasn't tense, didn't seem angry, just wary the way he'd been the night before.

The second omega dug around inside the bin, producing a pair of thick wooly socks and offering them to Max. After a moment of hesitation, another glance at Nick to make sure this was allowed, Max accepted them. There wasn't enough room in the tiny hallway packed with three people for him to bend over and put them on, so he just held them, while the second omega continued to rifle.

You're more my size, so either of these should fit you. Now, he was holding up a yellow sweater and a navy blue jacket. He glanced at Max, and then weighed them back and forth in his hands, while Nick looked over Max's shoulder.

Max gave it a second, in case this was about Nick dressing him, before gesturing to the jacket. Next came hats, and Max opted for a dark green cable knit beanie over a bright orange hunter's cap.

You've been blending in a long time.

Max kept his eyes averted from Nick as he pulled the beanie on, hoping this wasn't a test with wrong answers.

The second omega pulled on the items Max hadn't chosen, and they filed to the RV door. Immediately, Max took a deep breath, grateful for the forest air. He'd been worried, in the kind of thought he hadn't let himself think all the way, that they would keep him in the bedroom, and not let him back outside. They certainly didn't have to let him out, especially while he was still so new and something of a flight risk. But there hadn't been any drama at the door, even. No implied threats, no restraints. Nick had just…let him out.

Outside, Wes was asleep in a bedroll by the long-dead fire, and the quiet beta gave them a little wave from where he was walking a slow circle around the periphery of the camp, rifle in hand. Max could smell, but couldn't see, the second alpha, and it wasn't until Nick exited the RV and turned back towards it that he realized the missing man was on the roof.

Status report?

Quiet all night. Pete and Wes swapped off at the four-hour, but I've been up, and there's been nothing.

Nick let out a sigh. *Thank you. I know we talked about staying in the area another few days…*

But you want to book it. Yeah, so do I. We're good on supplies another…three days at least, without any hunting or scavenging. I know you don't like to cut it that close with the food, but…

I like it even less that we were followed and watched, even if it turns out to be benign.

Oh yeah, right there with you. If he can pull that off, half-dead from starvation…

Yeah. Believe me, I've been thinking about what he's capable of.

You know Isaac's not going to un-adopt him for anything, right? The other alpha's tone became a little teasing, and Nick sighed again.

Last night. He took off his own clothes. Expected me to…

The other alpha sucked at his teeth. *Ah, shit.*

I didn't.

No shit, Nick, I know you didn't. You okay?

Yeah, we're all fine. Took me awhile to fall asleep, but everybody's okay. I just mention it, because…

None of us are going to take a pass at him.

I know, I know, I just want to say it.

I hear you, Sarge. Let's get some food going, and get on the road .

With a hand on his shoulder, Nick maneuvered Max back to sit on the rock from the night before. Then they stayed there, Max sitting with his shoulders slightly hunched, Nick standing next to him, while the rest of the camp got to work. It didn't seem like they wanted him to do anything—or, more precisely, it seemed like what Nick wanted him to do was stay put, and not help with the work.

It was just before dawn, the overcast sky the barest milky gray. Max watched from under his lashes as the second alpha jumped down from the RV roof, and approached the fire pit. He

crouched, and the other omega brought him a pair of split logs and an armful of kindling. Max hadn't seen Isaac dress or leave, but he came up from the direction of the river with one sloshing five-gallon bucket in each hand, his rifle slung across his chest.

It was different, to be actually in the camp with them instead of perched at a distance. He'd known that the other alpha had a tattoo on the side of his neck, some kind of animal, but at this close range he could see it was a bull. He'd marked Isaac as left-handed from the way he held his rifle, but as he unscrewed the lid to a cistern attached to the RV, Max considered that the tall omega might be ambidextrous.

Another point in this group's favor: as far as Max had observed, they didn't divide chores according to status. He'd seen Nick wash clothes in the river, seen Isaac stand watch with his rifle in hand. Currently, the other alpha and the other omega were cooking breakfast together, bringing some of the water Isaac had collected to a boil in a large cooking pot suspended over the fire. And then there was Wes, who was allowed to sleep in while the rest of them worked, after having been up late on watch. When the food was done, Isaac plopped down on the ground next to him, ruffling his hair and talking to him gently to rouse him. Even when he just grunted and pulled his bedroll over his head, there was no kick in the ribs to get him up.

Max flinched when Nick tapped his shoulder, but then hurried to stand. He let Nick steer him over to the group around the fire.

Logan, you got him?

I got him. The other alpha patted the ground beside him, giving Max a friendly smile. *Hey there, kid. Set on down, I don't bite.*

It was one thing to hold still while an alpha approached, but another to voluntarily move himself within arm's reach. It was clear what they wanted from him, but Max felt a little surge of panic, as his legs locked.

They were all quiet, all watching him. Max bit down on his cheek, and forced himself to move. He ended up sitting cross-legged a foot further than where the other alpha had directed him, but nobody cuffed him for it.

Nick went to relieve the quiet beta from his position guarding the camp. This was another thing Max had learned to expect from watching them: in a reversal of how most packs handled meals, the lead alpha of this group would eat last.

Where are his shoes? The quiet beta trotted up to the group, and crouched down on the other side of Max.

Not in the RV, I looked when we got him some warm stuff.

Nick called to them from where he'd stationed himself with his rifle: *I stuck them in the to-wash bin, but they're not all that bad, actually.*

The quiet beta disappeared into the RV, and then returned…carrying Max's boots. Max felt his own attention lock on as he tracked the other man's approach for a moment, before he

made himself drop his eyes. It wouldn't do to look too eager, too much like he wanted something. Especially when he hadn't even done anything to get them back.

Have any of you told Max your names yet? Isaac had maneuvered Wes's head into his lap, and was deftly finger-combing the tangles out of Wes's long brown hair, even as Wes put up a front of still being asleep.

The quiet beta set Max's boots on the ground next to him, and then drew with his finger in the dirt next to the campfire: **PETE**.

"Hi Pete, I'm Max. I bet the others told you that already." Max kept his hands folded tightly in his lap, so as to avoid even the appearance of reaching for his shoes.

With a groan, Wes finally sat up, his hair a mess despite Isaac's ministrations. *Morning, Max. You don't happen to have a super secret stash of apocalypse coffee in one of these trees or something, do you?*

"Good morning, Wes." He had to really make sure to keep track of their names. It wasn't like he could ask them again if he forgot.

Just the oat milk off the top. You can add a little sugar. Just a tiny bit. Pete was supervising the other alpha, as the man dipped a mug into the steaming pot they'd suspended over the fire.

Max held very still as the other alpha approached, and crouched down. His heart pounded as the mug was brought to his lips. They were feeding him again, when he hadn't even—

It was hot, the water slightly sweet and starchy-thick, skimmed off the top of the men's oatmeal. He leaned into it, savoring the taste, the warmth.

Like the previous night, the alpha pulled it back when Max was halfway done. This time, he knew to expect it, so it was easier to keep calm. This sort of thing, the hand-feeding in fits and starts, keeping him on their dregs, must be how they trained their omegas. He hadn't seen them do this with the other two, but that was probably because Isaac and the other omega were past the point of needing such training. If anything, that gave him hope that he could get there, too, if he played his cards right. Max was the unknown to the rest of them, here. He still had to prove himself to them, still had to learn the rules—and that was fine, he could do that. He knew how to be good for them, and as far as training went, this was painless. It just meant waiting, and Max could wait. Max bowed his head submissively, but he could still observe the movements of the others from this angle. Without looking directly at them, mainly by listening, he tracked as the others filled their bowls with oatmeal and dried fruit.

Max really can't have any? Wes broke the quiet, his voice a little tense.

Liquids for five to seven days. Pete seemed terse. *I've already explained this. It's not like I can put him on a mineral drip if you idiots induce refeeding syndrome and collapse his system*.

Five days, then. And yesterday was day one, so this is day two.

Wes, you can't rules-lawyer somebody out of metabolic shutdown.

It just feels mean, that he's sitting there watching us eat.

The other alpha cleared his throat, and reached out slowly to pat Max's shoulder. *We're taking care of him, Wes. Max, you hear me? We got you.*

It sounded like Max was being addressed, so he turned towards the alpha a little to acknowledge it, keeping his head bowed and eyes down.

The alpha set the mug down in front of Max, and took his own bowl when Isaac offered it. Max stared at the steaming mug a moment too long—it was blue with white speckles, a chip in the handle—before he forced his eyes back down to his folded hands. As tests went, this one was obvious. They'd set him up in a little triangle: his shoes off to his left, the mug in front of him, the other alpha on his right ready to correct him if he reached for something he hadn't been given permission to have. He focused on his breathing, keeping himself calm and steady with the knowledge that this wouldn't last very long, that there wouldn't be a punishment because he wasn't going to fuck this up.

The rest of them ate in relative quiet for a few minutes, until Wes broke it. *He's so still.*

He's terrified of us. The other omega spoke quietly as he took the pot of food off the fire, swapping it out for another larger bucket full of water. *And it's going to stay that way for a long time. We can't even talk to him.*

We should get him a notebook, since he can read and write. Can babels do sign language?

I bet we can work something out. Hey Max, sweetheart?

Max carefully looked up without raising his head, to find Isaac grinning and waving at him from the other side of the campfire.

You can finish your breakfast. Pete, he can finish his breakfast, right? Isaac mimed reaching for something on the ground in front of him, and bringing it to his mouth. He made the movement again, and when Max's gaze flickered between Isaac and the blue mug in front of him, Isaac's grin widened and he nodded emphatically.

Isaac, so far, had looked out for him. Max didn't know what this meant, if Isaac was encouraging him to disobey for some reason or if he was trying to say that the test was over now, that Max could take the mug himself.

Max opened his mouth just slightly, scenting the air. Everyone smelled calm, and there wasn't even a trace of wrath in the group's scent. He risked a quick glance around, still keeping his head down. Nick was maybe thirty feet away, not looking at them. Wes was filling another bowl with what was left from the pot, for Nick if Max's previous spying was anything to go by. The skittish omega was collecting empty bowls, and the others were all watching Max.

He needs to go slow. Logan, you can let him have the rest. Max caught Pete gesturing out of the corner of his eye.

The other alpha picked the mug back up again, and brought it to Max's lips. Max leaned in—the liquid had cooled slightly, but he drank until it was gone.

Something in him settled, that he'd been allowed to finish the mug. He'd been right: this was going to be fine. Max could just be good, and they wouldn't have to starve him to prove a point.

"Thank you," he said to the alpha, and slowly, carefully reached for the empty mug. The alpha let him take it, and then let Max take his empty bowl. "I'll take care of these."

When he shifted into a crouch to take Pete's bowl, the beta hesitated. *Oh, hey, no. Kid, you don't have to—*

Let him help. The skittish omega interrupted, as he dropped the other bowls into the now-empty pot. *He'll feel better if he's contributing, trust me.*

Pete relented, letting Max take his bowl. *Don't let him lift anything heavy, all right?*

The bucket over the fire was steaming now, and Max, after getting a nod from the alpha, began to help the skittish omega with the dishes. The group broke up, Isaac disappearing to collect more water and Pete swapping back off with Nick on guard duty. Nick crouched by the fire as he ate his breakfast quickly, and Max kept him in his peripheral vision while he did the dishes.

He'd learned their process over the last few days: one person, the other omega this time around, dug a little pit with a spade retrieved from the RV. Then they used fistfuls of dry grass to wipe any residue from the bowls, spoons, and other cooking implements, dumping it all in the hole and burying it. In the future, this was going to be the step where Max planned to take advantage of any scraps. He'd lick the bowls right now if he thought he could get away with it, but as it was they were all watching him too closely, and his position was too tenuous to try and sneak anything.

Next, Max took a clean rag offered by the other omega, and scrubbed the dishes in the hot water with a little bit of soap. He shoved his jacket and shirtsleeves up to his elbows, and passed the items one at a time off to the other omega, who rinsed them in a second bucket before drying them and stowing them back in the RV.

The hot water felt good, and Max took the opportunity to scrub his hands, working the corner of the dish cloth under each of his still-grimy nails and around his cuticles. Along the lines of his palms and the creases of his knuckles, the dirt had become deeply ingrained, but he managed to steam and scrub almost all of it off.

He hunched his shoulders up reflexively when Nick approached them, but then made himself drop them. Tipped his head to the side to expose his neck, even though it sent a tremor through him.

Thank you for helping, Max. Nick passed him his bowl and spoon, and Max dipped his head in a move that wasn't quite a bow but was still deferential as he took the items.

Suddenly, Nick's hand shot out, clasping onto Max's wrist before he could pull away. Max jerked in surprise and let out a whimper without meaning to, Nick's dishes thumping to the bottom of the hot water bucket as he lost his grip.

His impulse was to rip himself free, but he didn't even have his shoes anymore. He knew he wouldn't get far. So instead, his mind flipped over to trying to figure out what he'd done wrong so he could fix it, as he leaned away from Nick, cringing backwards without outright pulling his arm away.

"I'm sorry," Max said, and he could hear the whine in his own voice. "I know you don't understand me, but I'm sorry if I made you mad. I'm sorry, and I'll fix it, I promise."

It was almost painful to make himself look Nick in the face, and when he did he wished he hadn't. The lead alpha's mouth was pressed thin with disapproval that made Max's throat tighten, and when he took in a little gasp of air Nick's scent was tinged with anger.

"I'm sorry," Max repeated, and he tried to think of something else he could say, something else he could do to head this off. The only thing he could think of would be to kneel, but he found himself gritting his teeth instead. That…that was too much. Max didn't think he could do it, not yet. The degree to which Nick loomed over him was bad enough with them both on their feet, and Max told himself that this wasn't paralysis on his part, this was just strategy. He'd save it for when Nick actually started hitting him. He'd be glad to still have a card to play, when it came to that.

Alphas had been fucking impossible back when Max could have a conversation with them, but being reduced to this sort of high-stakes guesswork made him sick to his stomach.

Nick, you're scaring him. The skittish omega was hovering next to them, and he reached out, not quite touching Nick's shoulder.

Have you seen this? His wrists? His arm? Nick was frowning down not at Max's face, but at the exposed length of marred skin down his inner arm. His grip loosened until it was barely a grip at all, but he turned Max's arm gently, angling as he inspected the damage.

Max kept his swearing to the inside of his clenched teeth, because if it was the scars Nick didn't like, there was nothing Max could do about that. This was the kind of stupid shit alphas could get hung up over, and Max couldn't find it in him to even respect it. So fucking what if he wasn't smooth and new all over? Nobody expected that of other dynamics, just omegas, and omegas certainly weren't spared the rougher edges of life. That particular scar—five inches long, one inch wide, a burn that had melted the skin straight down the middle of his right forearm—was one Max happened to like. He'd done it to himself two years ago, and there was a matching one under his shirt just below his collarbone.

At the time, it had meant he was his own person, for once in his life. At the time, it had meant never again.

But then he'd gotten so hungry.

A shout from down the hill: *Nick, beloved, I'm going to need you to unhand baby boy there before he has an aneurism, or I'm going to have to drop kick you into the river.* Isaac was coming back with more water, and at his approach Nick dropped Max's wrist.

Did you see, when he cleaned up last night? Are there any injuries we need to be taking care of?

Max took a half-step backwards out of Nick's reach, and then stopped himself. He needed to remember not to flinch, not from this alpha. He didn't get to do that, anymore. If Nick wanted to grab him, wanted to hurt him, he would, and nothing was going to stop him. Certainly not Max.

I didn't look, because the poor thing deserves what privacy we could give him. If he has an injury, it'll come up without you manhandling him. Honestly, Nicholas, it's like you've learned nothing from when we found Johnny. Isaac swept over them like a benevolent storm, setting his buckets down and bustling right between Nick and Max. Gently, he tugged Max's sleeves back down.

There we go. Nobody's business, is it? Tough fucking world out there, but you're tougher, isn't that right? I know exactly how it is. Come on, Nick can finish the dishes since he's being so melodramatic. Let's get you back inside, sweetheart. What did you do with your shoes? Nick, why isn't baby boy wearing his shoes?

Max couldn't explain the way the mere sound of Isaac's voice loosened something in his chest. It was instinct, to lean towards him.

I don't know. Nick passed a hand over his face, suddenly tired.

The other omega retrieved Max's shoes. *We gave them back to him, but he didn't put them on.*

Hmm. Isaac threw an arm over Max's shoulders, and started to steer him towards the RV again. He called to Nick over his shoulder: *Grab him like that again and I'll take your hand off with my teeth, beloved.*

I know, I know. I—wait, hang on. Nick sidestepped into their path, one hand up in…

It was a placating gesture. Max did a double take, to see that from an alpha. He was so surprised he forgot that he wasn't supposed to be looking the alphas in the face, and he met Nick's eyes.

Deep brown eyes, framed by long, thick lashes. Set into a pale brown face, lightly lined in a way that made his age hard to guess, although if pressed Max would go with early thirties. Nick's full lips gave his face a slightly unexpected softness, and there was an earnestness there that stopped Max in his tracks.

He didn't understand the words Nick said to him then. Would never understand any of his words, no matter how long they spent together, no matter what else passed between them. But

the tone of it, his expression, the fact that he was talking to Max anyways even though they both knew Max wouldn't understand: it all added up to a feeling Max could interpret, at the very least. They were good, Max and Nick. Nick wasn't upset, was maybe even a little apologetic, and so Max didn't have to be afraid. He felt his shoulders come down. Max nodded, and hoped it Nick could tell that he got it.

Isaac planted a kiss on Max's cheek, and then leaned in to catch Nick's lips for a longer, lingering kiss. Then he continued on to the RV, towing Max along with him.

The other alpha followed them inside. *Hey, Max. C'mere a sec.* He waved Max towards a little door across from the clothing bins, and opened it to reveal a tiny bathroom. Composting toilet, bucket of sawdust, sink fixed into the wall, mirror bolted above it. There wasn't room for two people in the bathroom, so Max stood in the hall while the alpha breathed on the mirror, fogging it up. He wrote with his finger, joining the letters together in a surprisingly neat cursive: **Logan** . Then he pulled back, grinning, and gestured to himself.

Logan was a little younger than Nick—late twenties. He was wiry where Nick was broad, and only maybe an inch or two taller than Max. The tan of his skin was very much from the sun rather than heritage, and his blue eyes crinkled at the corners when Max dared to meet them.

Even though Max couldn't make himself hold eye contact, he found himself smiling a little in return. "Hi, Logan. Thanks for feeding me, this morning. Thanks for having me here."

Oh my god, you're adorable. Brave as shit, anybody ever tell you that? I'm going to crash now, but I'm so glad you came to us. We're going to take care of you.

Max retreated as Logan eased by him, and he watched for a second as the other man stripped off his outer layers and then flopped down in the bedroom in a T-shirt and boxers. There wasn't even the implication that Max was to follow. He turned, and found Isaac's eyes where the other man was watching him from a booth set into the wall. Max gestured towards the bathroom. "Is it okay if I…"

Go, go ahead, all good. Isaac waved at him and smiled, and Max took the permission to slip into the bathroom and close the door.

Alone. Max let his face fall, as he gripped the sink. He'd forgotten how much it took out of him, trying to be so careful all the time. Controlling his expression, keeping still, not reacting the way his body wanted him to. It had been…such a relief, to be on his own. At first, and then for a long time after. He could be done with not just the mind games and harsh consequences inherent to living with a pack, but the ways in which he inevitably contorted himself to handle it. Even just the waiting—Max hadn't realized how much of his life he'd spent waiting, before. Going where he was put, keeping his head down, being nothing while everyone else made all the decisions. He'd gotten to be done with all of it, in an instant. And it had been so nice, to have that much say in his own life. Deciding when he woke up, when he went to sleep. What he was going to do that day, what he was going to do with all of his time. Making plans beyond the next few minutes had been a novel experience, but Max had loved it. And despite what everyone said about omegas he'd managed to be good at it, for a pretty long time.

That was over now, though.

He relieved himself, and washed his hands in the sink. They had soap in here, and after he washed his hands he took a moment to scrub his face as clean as he could get it, tucking his new hat into his jacket pocket out of the way. He spent a little time on his wrists, pushing his shirt and jacket back up. The dirt tended to accumulate along the ridged scars, same as it did the creases of his palms, and Nick had already noticed.

He stared at himself in the mirror for a long moment, after he scrubbed his face dry with a hand towel handing on the wall. This wasn't a great state of affairs, all told. He hadn't gotten a good look at himself in some time, but he was badly emaciated, his pale skin loose over his prominent bones. It made all his features skeletal and more exaggerated, from his arched nose to his pointed chin. His hair—dense, dark brown curls, six or seven months of growth at least, and maybe matted beyond help at this point. His eyes, more hazel than brown, were sunken and ringed with shadows.

Max had to admit: he wouldn't want to fuck him, either, if he were an alpha.

There wasn't much he could do at this juncture to be more appealing, but hopefully they would keep him around while he put on a bit of weight. Maybe let him do something about his hair—buzz it off, if Isaac's style was any indication of what Nick preferred. Neither of the other omegas ever wore makeup in the time Max had observed them, so this pack's alphas probably liked the natural look. It was just a shame that Max's current natural look was more 'near starvation' than anything else.

He took a breath to steady himself, and then slipped back out the door. Isaac was still seated in the booth, and he held out his arm, an obvious indication that Max should join. Wes was leaned up against the opposite wall, and he smiled as Max slid into the booth, immediately sitting beside Isaac.

This part—Isaac's warmth, his crooning, one arm wrapped around Max and scritching through his hair—Max had missed. Touch coming from alphas, and from betas too, was often unnerving at best and frightening at worst. His instincts might crave it, but Max generally knew better. Even in the moments when it was good, it wasn't worth the cost. But other omegas were safe. The camaraderie, the intimacy with others of his own dynamic—that had been the best part, of all of Max's previous experiences with packs. He knew it was important to get Nick, and to a lesser extent Logan, to want him. He understood that, on an intellectual level. But his whole body yearned for Isaac to like him, to fuss over him, to be as caring and gentle as he was being right now. Max wasn't going to run for a lot of reasons, first among them being that it was pretty clear he'd die if he stayed on his own much longer, but Isaac's easy affection was far and away the best reason to stay.

Max wanted to reciprocate. Wes was watching them, but with a small smile on his face, and he didn't seem like he was about to interfere. The actual hierarchy here was a little confusing, but the way Isaac spoke to the others, intervening even with Nick, clearly made him one of the pack's leaders. Max turned his face into Isaac's neck so he wouldn't have to watch Wes watching them, and settled one of his hands on Isaac's knee.

Oh my god, just kill me now, baby boy you're too precious.

I think he likes you.

Wes, I'm going to die, he's so cute.

The RV door opened, and Max peeked a little, watching the rest of the pack board.

Nick went to the driver's seat. *Isaac, shotgun?*

Little busy turning into a puddle, darling.

Please? I'd kind of like to talk this over. I'm…not thrilled, about heading into Kansas City with this as a complication.

Isaac sighed. *Yeah, I know*. He tapped Max's hand, and Max pulled back, disentangling. He gestured to himself, and to the front of the RV. *We're going to be right up there if you need anything, okay? Come get us for any little thing, okay baby?*

Nick hesitated. *Wes, are you going to sleep?*

Maybe later. I can watch him, if that's what you're asking.

Thank you, yes.

Nick and Isaac took the front seats, as they got underway. The rumble of Nick's voice would be too soft to hear even if Max could have understood, and Isaac's voice was similarly pitched low. Pete went back into the bedroom with Logan to sleep, and the other omega gestured to the booth, like he was asking Max's permission to sit next to him. Max slid over immediately, and the other omega joined him.

I haven't introduced myself yet, but I'm Johnny. He took his finger and made a J on the table top in front of them, glancing to Max, who nodded. To show he understood what they were doing, Max traced a J on the table, too.

Slowly, with Max copying, they made it through J-O-H-N. When John sat back, Wes snorted, and scooted into the booth on the other side of him, to add N-Y. *If I'm Wes and not Weston, you can't be John , man, be serious.*

Johnny scoffed at him, but it was lighthearted. Max watched out of the corner of his eye as the two of them fit against each other, Wes's arm casually over Johnny's shoulders, Johnny's head leaned back into Wes like he wasn't the least bit afraid. These two were the youngest of the pack, early twenties by Max's reckoning.

Johnny caught Max's eye, caught him watching, and set his hand on the table, palm-up, before Max could turn away. Max took a moment to think about it, and then slowly, cautiously slid his right hand over Johnny's left.

He let his fingertips track over the callouses of Johnny's palm, brushing lightly down the length of his fingers before settling into a loose version of holding hands. Max shot a quick glance at Wes to make sure he was okay with this, and found the beta's expression had gone soft and a little sad.

Johnny caught Max checking for Wes's approval, too, and his lips pressed together. *It's okay, Max. You're doing really well. I…I think I did worse, when I first joined the pack. And I had more to work with. At least they could tell me they weren't going to beat me, even if I didn't believe it.* His voice was soft, like he was talking to himself as much as he was talking to Max. *Not for a long time .*

Wes kissed Johnny on the temple. *You see his wrists?*

Yeah. Somebody tried to keep him, when he didn't want to be kept. Honestly? It makes me feel better, about us having him here.

How do you mean?

If he doesn't want to stay, he'll go. I don't think we…even with the communication issue, I don't think we could keep him, against his consent. If we cross his lines, even accidentally, he'll run. He knows how to do that, and he won't stay through anything he really doesn't want out of fear or inertia. I wasn't…I'm not like that. Johnny shivered slightly. *I've never had to be alone. I wouldn't know how.*

Whatever Johnny was saying, it put a note of distress in Wes's scent. *You'll never have to.*

Max listened to the pattern of their voices, for the long drive until they stopped around midday. Nick pulled the RV off the road behind a copse of trees, and Isaac went back to the bedroom to rouse Logan and Pete. They circled up around the table, which trapped Max in the booth.

Nick cleared his throat. *Okay. So where we're at, is this: we can't not do the Kansas City job. They're expecting us and the situation is urgent, so the mission still has to come first. It is going to be dangerous. Like with Johnny, there is nowhere else safe we could send Max.*

And we're not going to leave him, Wes interrupted.

No, we're not going to leave him.

He's ours, Isaac said. There was the barest edge to his voice, but somehow the whole group relaxed a little after he spoke. Max could feel it, a deflating of the tension.

One way this is different, Nick continued, *is that we could explain who we are and what we do to Johnny, who then decided that he was ready to accept the risk of being in this pack. It would not be fair to Max, to drag him into this shit without him knowing what's going on. So we're going to need to find a way to communicate with him, and we have to be prepared to send him on his way if this isn't something he wants to be a part of.*

The tension was back. Wes was frowning, and Pete broke into the conversation, his tone aggrieved. *Not in this state, though. Sarge, we're going to be in Kansas City by the end of the week, and he'll barely be on solids at that point. I can't in good conscience—*

I'm not asking you to go against your conscience—

Isaac cut in, and the rest of them fell silent: *You think I want to let this kid out of my sight ever again? He's clearly been through hell and is on his last legs. But what I'm not going to do, Pete, is take somebody to death's door who didn't sign up for it in advance.*

So you'd dump a starving omega in the wilderness? Pete exclaimed, more incredulous than pissed off.

Nobody's dumping anybody anywhere. Nick passed a hand over his face. *If he doesn't want to stay with us, that's his prerogative. I won't pretend there's an ideal solution, here, but I'm with Isaac on this. He needs to know what he's risking, if he stays.*

Nah, we'll get his consent, it'll be all good. Wes waved a little, to get Max's attention. *We* , he gestured to the group. *Defuse* , he made a repetitive tearing motion with his hands. *Nuclear missiles ,* he put both hands on the table and then popped them up, shaking them around in the air. Then he made an X with his index fingers, shaking his head with a serious expression. *Max, are you good with that?* He pointed to Max, and smiled with a thumbs up. *Or bad with that?* He made a thumbs down, and an exaggerated frown.

Max's impulse was to shrink since he was obviously being asked some type of question he had no way to answer, but the others seemed more focused on Wes than on him.

For shit's sake. Nick covered his face with both of his hands.

That's what you'd sign for 'nuclear missiles?' Johnny seemed to be trying not to laugh.

I'm trying to do the mushroom cloud! Wes repeated the most nonsensical of the motions, followed by the X again. *Mushroom cloud,* no.

What is this? Isaac wasn't trying to smother his laughter at all, as he repeated the tearing motion. *What is it you think I do, snap them like they're sticks?*

Pete was shaking his head, but he was smiling, too. *Wes, somehow I don't think that's going to get it across. Sarge needs to give his whole 'we still live in a society' speech.*

The group, at least, seemed to recognize the absurdity in Wes's attempt to communicate, which took the pressure off Max to try and take it seriously. Impulsively, he gave Wes a thumbs up, since it was clear they didn't really expect him to have understood.

Most of the pack dissolved into laughter, and what tension remained vanished. Nick gave a small smile, but his eyes were appraising Max in a way that wasn't entirely comfortable.

Jesus Christ, he made a fucking joke, Logan exclaimed.

He's going to be okay . Isaac was merry too, but a little misty-eyed. *He's going to fit right in.*

Oh ! Wes got to his feet fast enough that Max cringed a little, even with Johnny in between them. *The picture! Why didn't I think of this before, when we were doing everybody's names?*

He pushed past the others to get to the cab of the RV, and then after some rustling reemerged with an 8-by-10 glossy photo that had seen better days, faded and crunched at the corners. He

pushed it at Max, who took it carefully, and then he took his seat next on the other side of Johnny once again.

A dozen men in army fatigues were arranged in two lines of six. Max picked out the faces of the pack immediately, minus Johnny. This was clearly a years-old photo, judging by how much they'd all aged. The Pete in the photo had a full beard and head of hair in dark brown, while the man standing on the other side of table was going silver at his temples and had salt-and-pepper stubble. Nick was significantly more heavyset in the photo, and his face had fewer lines, his expression and posture more relaxed than Max had ever seen him. The most dramatic difference was Wes, who looked much more like a child than a young man, beardless and throwing a peace sign at the camera with a giant grin.

Their names and ranks were on the back, in between the names of the men pictured who Max guessed were no longer living. Staff Sergeant Nicholas Ortiz. Captain Isaac Harris, PhD. Major Peter Karakozov, MD. Private Weston Smith. Second Lieutenant Logan Prejean-LeBlanc.

Max was so preoccupied with picking out their names that he didn't notice the heading until Wes tapped it. In handwriting above the typed names, someone had scrawled: **OG Bomb Squad 2k17!!**

This was from before the collapse. Before the virus, even. Wes tapped the words Bomb Squad again, and then gestured in a circle, at the pack. He made the gesture again, popping his hands up and shaking them around, followed by making the X and shaking his head with a serious expression.

"You're a bomb squad," Max said slowly. He tapped the table, raising his eyebrows. "Now? You're working as a bomb squad, now?"

Wes tapped the words Bomb Squad a third time, and repeated the thumbs up/thumbs down gesture.

"Are you asking me if that's okay?" Max thought aloud. He still didn't understand the question, but he gave Wes a thumbs up anyways.

Yeah, this isn't good enough. Nick was shaking his head. *Thanks for trying, Wes, but I want to raid the gas station, a quarter-mile up the road. Our usual resupply, but also a way to communicate with Max. Notebook and pen, at a minimum. Logan and Wes, I want you on recon. Secure the site, and then radio us and I'll drive down.*

The others talked, and Max flipped the photo back over to look at their faces again. The front row of six were seated, the back row standing. Isaac was in the middle of the back row, each arm thrown around the shoulders of the young men on either side, protective and familiar. Logan was sitting, and the angle of his legs didn't quite hide that he was holding hands with the soldier seated beside him. This photo, clearly so well-loved, wasn't just of the pack, Max realized. It was the pack as it had been, before. It was the people they'd lost.

Six years ago. A before getting hazier by the day. Max had still lived with the pack he'd been born into, his dam and sire and a handful of others. They'd sold him the next year, shortly

after he'd turned sixteen.

That first time, it hadn't been so bad. It had felt bad, had felt like the end of the world, but in hindsight Max knew he'd been treated gently by the pack who'd purchased him. They'd been very clear with him about their rules, and fair about the consequences. Max had been the one who was out of line, who'd struggled to adapt. If he could do it over again, knowing what he knew now, he would have buckled down and made it work.

After all, he now had the *actual* end of the world, to compare it to.

He turned the photo over again, and couldn't help but run his finger over Isaac's name. PhD—that was a lot of school for anyone, but for an omega? Max had been educated at home, up until he was sold. He'd liked Isaac before sort of on principle, but now he felt something like awe, that Isaac had been able to pull that off.

When he looked up again, Logan and Wes were strapping on combat gear from cupboards across from the table in what once had been a kitchenette, but had been refitted to accommodate a large gun locker. Max kept his eyes averted, and hoped he'd go unnoticed through whatever this was. He glanced around under his lashes, opening his mouth just a little to scent the air surreptitiously, and saw Johnny watching him. His expression was hard to read—maybe thoughtful, maybe sad.

It was more waiting after that, after Logan and Wes left. Nick, Pete, and Isaac geared up as well, and armed themselves. Max tried to be small and still, sitting in the booth with Johnny. He tried to think of nothing at all, because he was going to spiral hard if he started imaging reasons for them to be dressed for a fight.

A radio on Nick's shoulder crackled, even less intelligible than speech usually was to Max. The rest of them seemed to understand it, though, and Nick got back behind the wheel.

In minutes, they were parked behind a gas station convenience store, not visible from the road. Max kept his head down, but he stole glances out the window to orient himself as his heart pounded.

Max hadn't really expected to be allowed outside, but it stung a little bit that they let Johnny go out with Nick, while Isaac stayed in the RV with Max, posted by the door with his rifle. It was so clear that they didn't trust him, that he was being guarded.

Max put his hands on the table, palm up, and tucked his chin to his chest. He reminded himself that he'd chosen this. The RV wasn't a prison, was miles different from some of the places Max had been kept. They could be keeping him in the bedroom only, but they weren't doing that. They'd let him go outside to have breakfast with the group just hours ago, which was more than promising. He hadn't figured out what to do to get his shoes back yet, but they weren't keeping him tied up.

Isaac had his back to him, was watching out the window next to the door. Windows, Max had to remember that. He wasn't going to look now, when they clearly didn't want him involved with whatever was going on, but the windows made this RV meaningfully different from a shipping container, even if it was about the same size.

That had easily been among the worst of them. Four months, crammed in with a dozen other omegas, the only light coming in through a handful of speckled rust-holes that also let in the rain. He'd tried to sleep by the door, to up his odds of being chosen because they fed the ones they fucked. The omegas hadn't been able to do anything but listen, when their alphas and betas had been slaughtered by a raiding party. Max had only ever been taken in and out at night, and so the raiders dragging out their prizes had been the first time he'd seen the outside of the shipping container in the daylight. Painted on the side was a sign, in capital letters, in case anyone had any doubt what the pack thought of them: BITCHES.

Oh, sweetheart, it's okay. Isaac had turned, and Max could smell his own anxiety so he knew Isaac could too. *They're all just going to take a look around, and grab us some stuff. In and out, half an hour tops.*

That Isaac was trying to reassure him, even though Max couldn't understand, caused an unexpected prickling in his eyes. One of the other omegas in the shipping container had tried to keep everyone calm, during the attack. Max hadn't understood the words then either, but he'd known the tone, and he'd clung to it.

Isaac said something into his radio, and then kept talking to Max. The steady flow of his voice was as soothing as his calm scent, and gradually Max's shoulders went slack again. He found himself taking the photo in his hands once again, inspecting it, turning it over. He tapped Isaac's name, tapped the PhD, and pointed at Isaac, who grinned, nodded, and started speaking excitedly. Max imagined he was telling him what he'd studied, and how he'd liked it. He ran through options, for what it could be: art history. Physics. Environmental science. Spanish. He wondered if, whatever it was, it was still useful, in this world unmade. He hoped Isaac had had a good time, going to all that school.

The others came back as a group. Wes and Logan stayed outside, and from the sounds they made they were gassing up the RV. Nick, Johnny, and Pete brought bags of things, setting them on the floor.

As soon as Nick put his rifle away, he slid into the booth next to Max, who froze and did his best not to cringe away.

This was the best I could find. Nick produced a mostly-depleted three-by-five pad of paper, printed like a restaurant would have for taking orders, and a sharpened pencil. Max sucked in a sharp breath.

Three years. Three years, he'd been unable to communicate with anyone. Gestures, shouting, body language, implied threats—no one had ever really tried to speak to him, in a way he could understand. For the past two years, Max had done his best to avoid any other living soul.

He'd just calmed down again, but he felt his eyes tearing up when he made another moment of shocked eye contact with Nick. Nick's smile was a little sad, and he started writing on the pad.

When he finished, there was a question at the top of the first page: **Do you have any injuries that need medical attention?**

Max blinked. That was the first thing they wanted to know? He started to shake his head, but Nick pushed the pad and pencil across the table, in front of Max.

They were giving it to him. They were letting him talk, in the only way he could. His eyes clouded over for a moment before he blinked it back. His hand shook only for a second, before he took up the pencil: **No sir.**

He was going to be *so good* . He would do anything for them, if they let him have this.

When Max set the pencil down, Nick picked it back up. His next question took most of the rest of the little order pad's top page: **Are you in any danger, specifically are you a runaway and should we expect people to be coming after you?**

He gave Max the pencil back. Unhesitatingly, Max wrote, **No sir**.

Isaac slid in on the other side of Max, so he was bracketed by the pack leads. He looked at the notepad, and when he spoke it had the cadence of reading aloud.

Pete got behind the wheel, as the others boarded. But they stayed in a huddle around the table, even as the RV got underway.

Nick's next question moved to the next page: **If you are not a runaway, where did you come from? Where is your last pack?**

Max knew he couldn't afford to hesitate. He wrote: **I've been alone a long time, sir. My last pack is dead.**

He wasn't about to tell these men that he'd killed his last pack.

Nick: **you were the only survivor?**

Max: **yes sir.**

Max had been the only omega. They had kept him tied to the headboard, in that pack. An alpha and two betas, men who didn't care enough to let him heal before they used him again. He'd understood where that went, so he played along until they finally let him up, and he'd gone for the alpha's gun and gotten them first.

Wes interrupted, and Nick nodded at whatever he had to say, appearing to write it down: **how long have you been alone?**

This was a risky move, but Max wanted to test the waters with a question of his own. After a lightning-speed deliberation, he decided not to ask permission, and to just ask directly. Nick might cuff him for it, but he hadn't hit Max yet, which meant it was time to push it just a little: **I'm not sure exactly, sir. What's today's date?**

Nick: **December 18th, 2023.**

Max: **thank you sir. I've been alone for about two years.**

That set off a round of exclamations from the pack, and Max cringed, his heart racing. Maybe he shouldn't have been honest. Maybe thinking he'd gone, what, feral? Would make them trust him even less. Maybe they'd think him more in need of breaking, for having been without an alpha for so long.

Nick spoke to the group for a moment, and while they all calmed in speech, their scents remained distressed. His next question started a new page: **I have some things to tell you about this pack. But first, do you have any questions for us? Anything you want to say?**

Max's heart was in his mouth. He took the pencil, his palms starting to sweat. There weren't many pages in this pad—eight or ten at the most, leafs of paper not much bigger than his hand. And there was no telling if he might ever have this opportunity again. The enormity of it was breathing down the back of his neck. He had to get this right.

Max: **No questions sir. I just want to say that I am so grateful to you and to your pack. Thank you for the food and thank you for the clothes. I am yours to claim and I swear I will be good for you. I'm sorry I can't understand but I promise I will make it up to you.**

The waft of displeasure that rose from the pack as Isaac read it aloud made Max start to tremble. He set the pad and pencil down, turning his empty hands palm-up on the table. He kept his eyes down on the table, kept his breathing in tightly controlled inhales and exhales, as he tipped his head to the side, showing Nick his neck.

Several people started talking at once, and Max cringed as they started to raise their voices. Isaac seemed to win out once again, gesturing sharply to the group. As he spoke, Nick tried to pass him the pencil and paper, but Isaac shook his head and passed it back. Johnny spoke quietly, voice hesitant, as Nick started to write something on the pad.

Isaac shifted, pressing the side of his thigh against Max's under the table. He was still wearing a plate carrier, but Max leaned into him.

Nick filled a page, and then another. Max bit his tongue to keep from fidgeting. This must be the rules. This pack was so kind—Nick was writing them out for him, to make sure he understood. He wouldn't have to find out through breaking them accidentally.

Max took a deep breath, when Nick passed the paper back. Under the heading **THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PACK** , he'd made bullet points:

- **We are not going to hurt you**
- **This means we aren't going to beat you, and nobody is going to do anything to you that you don't want**
- **Including sex**
- **We don't think it is your fault that you can't understand and it is not something you have to make up for**
- **Being mine doesn't mean I'm going to mark you. Pete does not have a bite from me or from Logan and that doesn't make him any less a member of this pack**
- **This pack is a weapons disposal team, and we decided not to hunker down and establish a territory when everything collapsed. We think our work is very**

important, but it is very dangerous. Every job, we could all die if things go wrong. We have lost people in the past. If you decide that this is too dangerous and you don't want to be with us, that is OK and we will give you food and help you find somewhere else to go. It is up to you. If you want to stay with us we will take care of you.

- **Questions are good and I want you to ask questions. Please ask a question on the next page.**

Max took in a shaky breath, and read it again. This was…not a list of rules. This was more like a conversation. He picked up the pencil, and wrote: **I want to be good for you sir. What are your rules?**

More conversation: anxious chatter from Wes, something like consternation from Logan. Once again, Isaac quieted the group, and he and Johnny spoke as Nick wrote.

Rules:

- **Don't hurt anyone**
- **This means anyone else and also yourself**
- **Listen to Pete about your health (he is a doctor)**
- **Tell someone if you need help or have questions**
- **Stay with someone else when you are outside the RV**
- **If something happens do whatever Johnny does, he already knows our emergency protocols**

Max looked from the pad of paper, to Nick, and then around at the pack. Was it possible they didn't know what he meant, by 'what are the rules'? And how was he supposed to tell anyone anything?

Nick took the pad back, flipped back. He tapped the line, " **Questions are good and I want you to ask questions. Please ask a question on the next page** ," and passed it back to Max.

Max had infinite questions. There were only three pages left in the little notepad. If this is what being 'good' meant to Nick for whatever reason, Max was going to be *great* .

He started with the obvious one: **What do you like?**

Somehow, this started another argument among the pack. Maybe everything Max said would. Maybe this was just how they all talked, everyone tripping over each other, not waiting for permission to speak.

Ultimately, Nick wrote back: **What do you mean?**

Max blinked at that. What did he mean, what did Max mean? He wrote: **If you tell me what you like then I will do it.**

More arguing. Logan seemed to have a strong opinion about this, and Pete yelled something from the driver's seat.

Nick flipped back, and underlined the lines, " **nobody is going to do anything to you that you don't want Including sex** ."

This was bordering on disrespect, but Max didn't want to use any more of the paper than necessary. He flipped pages too, and underlined for Nick: " **I want to be good for you sir**. "

This time, it was Nick who waved for the others to be quiet, and he wrote just one word at the top of a new page before passing the pad back to Max: **Why?**

What did he mean, *why* ? What part of this wasn't enormously fucking obvious? Max felt the dampness under his arms when he shifted his weight in his seat, uneasy. He reached for the pencil, and then stopped. He'd already decided that they would use the backs of the pages too, so he wasn't as concerned about taking up space as he had been initially. He picked up the pencil, and then put it down again, trying to pick this apart.

It depended on what part of it they didn't understand. He could certainly attempt to flay himself open, and tell them that he'd rather die than be sold again. That he didn't think he could survive that another time, the feeling of being a thing to be exchanged and used. That he'd spent two years piecing himself back together from the last time. That he'd killed for his freedom, but he was giving it up now, on purpose, and it had fucking better be worth it. That he *needed* them to keep him, that he understood what it was he had to offer. What made omegas valuable, to everyone else.

Why. He didn't want to gut himself like that, actually. Not for these people he didn't really know. It should be obvious to them, anyways. The other omegas had to know what Max meant, at least, and he found himself searching for Johnny's eyes. And there, yes, he got it. Max could tell he got it, had shared that look with other omegas a hundred times.

Johnny crouched on the other side of the table, and said something to Nick. Nick passed him the paper and pen. Beneath the why, Johnny wrote another full page. His handwriting was cramped but neat, and when he was finished he passed it back to Max.

You don't have to answer that. It is going to be hard to explain anyways. What happens now: we are going to a job in Kansas City and Isaac is going to take apart some nukes. Every time we do this there is a risk we all get blown up. The pack is concerned that you are going to be more afraid of being around the bombs than of being on your own. We don't have a good plan B if you don't want to come on the job but we also aren't going to take you if you don't want to come. Yes/no, do you want to stay with us, even knowing this?

Max read it twice, and then he took the pencil. He circled the **Yes** three times, underlined it. He set the pad flat on the table and tapped the **Yes** with the pencil, so they could all see it.

Smiles all around. The relief in Isaac's scent in particular was so strong that Max was taken aback a little bit, and he turned to look at him without thinking about how it put his back to Nick. The emotion on Isaac's face was hard to place, but he gently settled one large hand on either side of Max's face, and kissed him on the forehead. It felt like nothing less than a benediction, and Max was reminded strongly of the handful of times he'd seen other omegas

submit to the bonding bite of their alphas—a reverent sort of intimacy. When Isaac pulled back, he left his hands on Max's face for a long moment, as they held each other's eyes.

Isaac's age was hard to guess. He could be Nick's age, or he could be younger. Characteristically for an omega, he hadn't aged as visibly as the others from the time the photo was taken. Fine, almost delicate eyebrows arched above liquid black eyes. A long nose ran down to a mouth that was, once again, smiling at him with the warmth of the sun.

Max hadn't realized he'd been so cold, until that warmth reached something in his chest and it started to thaw.

When Isaac let him go, he felt the warm impression of his hands like a tingling on his face, and he felt himself blushing slightly. Isaac shucked off his plate carrier, and passed it to one of the others to put away in their gear cabinet. Then he tucked Max up against his side, and Max couldn't help but notice how well he fit there.

Nick took the pad of paper, and flipped back. Once again, he tapped the line, " **Questions are good and I want you to ask questions. Please ask a question on the next page** ." Then he pushed the paper and pencil back in front of Max, and sat back himself, giving Max the floor.

A glance around the circle, and they were all waiting on him, attentive. Ready to listen to what Max had to say. He waited another heartbeat, just to test it. But then Max picked up the pencil, and began to write.

Chapter 2: Kansas City, Part One

Chapter Summary

The further adventures of Max & his new pack.

This is still for Coffeexandxangst.

Chapter Notes

Hi everybody, it's been awhile! Please note that while the first chapter of what is now a multichapter piece did not include sexual content, as I go along and there is additional characterization and plot, more and more sexual content will come up. I will update tags accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Max supposed that if he was going to sit still and let somebody with blades come at his head, this was the least-bad version. He told himself this a lot, lately, and it was even true. Isaac was gentle, with the scissors and even the razor. He'd been gentle washing and attempting to comb Max's hair too, his fingers easing the matted curls apart. Isaac made conversation with the others around the campfire as he worked, but also tutted and fussed in a way Max could tell was directed at him, even if he couldn't understand the words.

This is not white boy hair, is it? What are you, sweetheart? Do you even know? Mm, that's all right. Lean forward for me just a bit now, okay?

A light pressure, on the back of his head. Max bent his neck as he'd been doing, letting Isaac maneuver him. It was *definitely* not the worst. Isaac smelled kinda nice.

Like this, head bowed, he tracked the movements of the pack with his other senses. Logan and Wes, at the table through the open trailer door, the clicks and clanks as they cleaned rifles. Johnny and Pete, up by the creek to the west of tonight's campsite, scrubbing clothes.

Nick, he had to track by scent. He couldn't see him, and the pack's alpha was usually uncannily quiet, as he made a wide loop of their perimeter, keeping watch. It took a few breaths, his mouth a little open, for Max to pinpoint him by smell. Then once he knew where Nick was, he could focus in on his soft footfalls on the frozen ground. Step step, step step—then a slight lag, a little slower, and Max could picture the way Nick swung his upper body just a little, as he scanned the trees.

A good distraction, from the scrape of the razor around Max's ear.

I know, baby, you don't like this part. Isaac was still chattering at him. *Nobody wishes more than me, that we still had batteries for the electric shaver. It takes me like an hour to get as hairless as I want to be with this old thing, but what can you do?*

Should have gotten LASIK while you had the chance, Wes said from inside the trailer, and it must have been a joke, because Isaac cackled.

Honey, what do you think LASIK is?

The thing where you get your hair zapped off, for permanent?

Isaac was still laughing, as he tipped Max's head to the other side. *You're thinking of electrolysis.*

Well, what the hell is LASIK, then!

It's not anything anymore, Logan said. *Don't worry about it.*

They were heading into Kansas City soon, but Max hadn't been with them long enough to really gauge the energy in the air. He'd realized that he still made the others nervous, somehow, in a way that was sticking around long after he'd proved unthreatening. But despite the way he was clearly throwing them off, Max could recognize the cleaning and maintenance everyone was occupied with as anticipatory, self-soothing. There was a tightness to the men's movements and voices, an unease in their scents, that could be about whatever was waiting for them in the city.

Or it could have nothing to do with that. Or Max could be reading into things, projecting his own anxiety about how things were about to change.

Isaac's hand brushed over the back of Max's head. *There we go,* he said, and he sounded pleased. That picked Max's mood up a little—very quickly, he'd fallen into liking it when Isaac was pleased with him. The others, it was still more about not drawing their ire, but with Isaac and a little bit with Johnny, Max found himself wanting to make them happy for its own sake.

All done? Lemme see! Wes came out of the trailer, and whistled approvingly. *Hell yeah, Isaac, you're an artist.*

Isaac stepped around to face Max, beaming. He cupped Max's cheek with one large hand, tipping his face up. *Nah, I just had gold to work with.* Max could feel the warmth of it, even if he couldn't parse the words. He couldn't stop himself from leaning into Isaac's hand, just a little.

Wes said something, waving Max into the trailer. He found himself hustled in front of the mirror in the tiny bathroom, and when he saw his reflection, he couldn't help but put his hands up to touch his hair.

It was a little novel, to feel his own fingers against his scalp. It had been six months at least, since his hair was this short. They'd made notes and little drawings in Max's sketchbook to figure out what Max wanted it to look like, once Isaac had firmly written to him that it was up to Max and not Nick. To Max's mortification, Isaac had had Nick pull the RV over, so that he could affirm in his steady handwriting that Max's hair was Max's decision.

He'd gone with an undercut, leaving it a little long on the top, long enough for his curls to cover his forehead but not get in his eyes. He'd never been allowed to choose a real haircut before, just what he'd managed mirrorless with a knife while on his own. But he'd seen this style before on other people, and liked it. Now that he had it, the air on his bare skin made him feel unexpectedly a little exposed. There were a few little scars here and there—insect bites, shrapnel—which were visible now. He was used to hiding in his mass of hair, and his head felt light without the weight of it.

He ran his fingers through the curls on top, unmatted, still damp from being washed. People looked like this, when they had somebody to look after their hair. He had to admit, he appeared cared for, now. Less stray. More owned.

Alright, alright! Logan was smiling too, and nodding, and for once Max managed not to flinch when an alpha came up to him. Logan leaned in to point at Max's reflection, at his new hair, and then gave him a thumbs up.

"Thanks," Max told him. "I like it, too."

And he did. It was objectively better to be clean and cared for, and he was grateful to the pack for providing that. They were all going so far above and beyond the life-saving level of investment that he'd hoped for.

He fished his pocket notebook out, the little three-by-five with the purple plastic cover and metal coil at the top. Max turned to the second page, and held it up for Logan: **Thank You.** He gestured with it, a little circular motion to include Isaac, standing behind Logan, in the message.

Aw, ain't nothing, Logan said, smiling, and he gave Max another thumbs up before he went back to the pile of rifles on the table.

Soon it started to get dark, which meant it was almost time for dinner. Max turned to the rapidly wearing seventh page of the pocket notebook—**Can I help?**—and started what was becoming something of a routine. He knew better by now than to ask to be allowed to carry anything heavy, because every one of them would tell him no. They also wouldn't let him do anything that involved handling a weapon, but they wouldn't hit him for asking—hadn't hit him for anything yet—and so he was going to keep trying, until he could prove his trustworthiness.

Can I help? He held it up for Pete, who was gutting fish they'd caught earlier.

The older man gave him a small, tight smile, the kind that said he could tell what Max was doing, but he shook his head no, and gestured for Max to try somebody else.

Can I help? Logan was using a hand axe to split wood gathered for their fire, and he shook his head, too, but he called something to where Johnny and Nick were standing by the creek, talking.

Max's anxiety spiked, uncontrolled enough to zing through his scent, but he calmed down when he saw that it wasn't Nick who peeled away to come over to them, but Johnny. His arms laden with stones, the other omega said something to Max and jerked his head, to beckon Max over.

They made the fire pit together, tamping grass and laying stones. Johnny didn't let Max heft the water to fill their large pot, but he did let Max help build the fire itself, layering kindling and logs. This pack had actual matches, which Max hadn't seen in at least six months, so the fire was easy to start.

The pack had a fairly large supply of wild rice, in plastic buckets with screw-on lids. Max had by now searched the entire RV in moments he'd been unwatched, and he guessed they had several days of food for all seven of them, even without the hunting, fishing, and scavenging the pack did almost daily. Wild rice was the staple for their dinners, and they had oats for breakfast. These were varyingly supplemented with jerky and dried fruit, along with whatever meat they could hunt or fish. They had a good supply of salt, and miscellaneous canned goods that turned over almost as quickly as they could be scavenged.

Tonight, they salted their cooking water and used the fish bones and heads to make a broth. Growing up, they'd almost never had wild rice, and Max had learned to cook with white rice. He thought he had this new stuff more or less figured out, despite how this pack almost never measured anything. They all seemed to know by sight and feel how much water to add to how much rice. He liked it when they let him stay by the fire while they cooked, not just so he could drink up the warmth and the smells, but so that he could try to learn as much as he could about how they did things.

Tonight, the rice would be cooked in the fish broth, while the fish would be baked on stones in the fire. Pete stuffed his fish fillets with canned diced chilis from their stash, and Max was practically drooling by the time they were cooked, even though he knew he wasn't going to get to eat it.

Yesterday, for the first time, he'd been allowed to have oatmeal in the morning, and rice in the evening. The day before that, he'd been caught sucking on bones discarded from the broth, but he hadn't been punished for it. Pete had sat him down and, in the pack's notebook, written out a long page about nutrition and caloric shock and electrolyte imbalance. Max had barely understood, but he got the general idea that when people were starving, feeding them too much too soon could make them so sick they could die. It had scared him enough to agree in the moment to the schedule Pete drew out for him, but not enough to tell him that Max had been sneaking scraps since his second day with the pack.

The easiest way, as it had been in his other packs, was to try and get cleanup duties after a meal. This pack scarcely left a grain of rice behind when they ate, but he could eat the eyes out of fish heads and get the film that accumulated on the inside of the pot lid. Nearly every member of the pack had promised him in writing that he wouldn't be starved—Wes had offered to fight anybody who would even think of starving Max, which had almost made

Max laugh—but still. He couldn't help it. This could all turn tomorrow, could all turn in the next hour, and he needed to build his strength up.

Besides, those scraps, like every damn thing else, hadn't killed him yet. He wasn't going to stop.

Tonight he got a bowl, and Pete measured out a serving of rice. A little more than what he'd had yesterday, even, and he couldn't stop the flood of relief and gratitude that tinged his scent, even though it always made the rest of the pack uncomfortable. Page two again: **Thank You.**

Yeah, bud, don't mention it, Pete said, rubbing the back of his own neck with his free hand.

Pete, Nick said quietly, and when Pete sat back down, it was next to Nick, so the pack alpha could rest his hand on the back of the beta's neck. Nick kept it there for a few minutes, bowl in his lap, eating his own food one-handed.

It wasn't the same for betas as it was for omegas, Max knew that. But it still seemed comforting, and he watched out of the corner of his eye as Pete's shoulders relaxed.

For all the gentleness he'd witnessed from Nick, Max's own shoulders still shot up when dinner ended, and instead of letting Max collect the bowls to start washing up, Nick gestured for Max to sit with him. The pack notebook had a green cover, and Nick had it open on one knee. With his pen, he tapped a line he'd written: **Hi Max, would you mind if we went over the procedure again?**

Max did mind, if it meant he wasn't going to get any scraps tonight. But he sat down, flipped his pocket notebook to page five: **Yes Sir.**

Max knew every part of the plan, for their time in Kansas City. It was too dangerous to split up the pack, so they'd be meeting their contacts and traveling to the job site together. Max and Johnny would stay on the perimeter, because they didn't have any training, but they'd be in earshot of the rest of the pack while they worked. Isaac would probably need at least three days to do his part of the job, if not longer, and the pack still wasn't sure how they were going to secure the site when they left.

Apparently, it was 'one of the more volatile situations' they'd worked with. Max understood that there was a bomb in a bad place for there to be a bomb. As opposed to a bomb being what, where it's supposed to be? In a good place for a bomb? That was too stupid a question to waste either the paper or Nick's time. But Max needed to ask something, because in the last few days he'd noticed that if he didn't, if he stuck with page five too much, Nick would become concerned that Max wasn't understanding him. It was a strange characteristic for an alpha, but asking questions was a way Max could reassure him.

The sketchbook was bigger than the pocket notebook, and they let Max keep it in a cross-body bag he wore nearly all the time, with pens and pencils. On the current page, there were a lot of notes and sketches about his hair, and Max felt a little silly to be showing it to Nick. But there was still space on the page, and Max didn't waste anything.

He came up with: **What happens if you need specialized equipment or technical expertise to finish the job, that we don't have? What's the longest amount of time it could take, if you think the shortest is three days? If it takes a long time, will we have to leave to find food and then come back?**

Nick leaned in to read once Max was done. His alpha-scent was familiar now, a sameness to how Max smelled after scent-marking and sleeping in the same bed for several nights. It clung to them, a sense of *Nick, pack, Nick's pack* underneath the woodsmoke-smell that was seeped into all their clothes from the endless nights of cookfires.

His instincts told him to lean in too, to be even more inside his alpha's space. But his experience wanted him to shy away, at least out of striking distance. Holding still was the compromise position, so Max spent a lot of time holding still.

In the pack notebook, Nick wrote:

- **It'll be other members of the military who called us. What's left of the military.**
- **Unfortunately we're the only remaining bomb squad who can operate at this level, so there's nobody else to call if we can't figure it out. There might be a disposal team in New Mexico who can securely dispose of the waste, but we haven't been able to contact them in months so we're not sure they're still alive.**
- **How long it will be depends on what the unit on-site wants. If they just need it disarmed, we'll be in and out. If they want us to haul this thing to New Mexico for disposal, it could take a month or more. We'll discuss it as a pack.**
- **The pack who called us will host us, while we're there. And they will give us as much food as we can haul, to get us through to the next job. We haven't been on the radio much since you came along, but we'll tap back in once we're on-site, and there will be another job.**
- **Is there anywhere that would be unsafe for you to travel?**

Max read it twice, to be safe, before he answered with page six: **No Sir.**

Nick wrote: **You sure? We would not cross into Johnny's old pack's territory, just to give you an example. We can show you maps, and you can tell us where any problems would be for you.**

Max hesitated, anxiety crawling up his spine. He didn't think he could tell Nick that he more or less had no idea where they were currently. That he was pretty sure he'd never left the state of Missouri in his life, but also he'd spent several years not knowing where he was, and was pretty sure there wasn't a state of Missouri anymore. He definitely wasn't going to explain that there hadn't exactly been a map on the inside of the shipping container, and that the

raiders had hogtied him, wrists to ankles, and tied a bag over his head before putting Max over a motorcycle.

He tapped Nick's **You sure?** and then showed him page five. **Yes Sir.**

They sat there quietly for another few minutes. Max focused on keeping his breathing even, because Nick was still holding the pen and hadn't dismissed him, but this was taking a long time.

Nick wrote: **I know we asked you already if there was anywhere, anyone, you'd rather go back to, than be with us. But if there's anywhere you'd like to visit, we'd take you. We did that a lot, in the beginning. Trying to figure out what happened where, and who was still alive.**

Max felt his throat tighten. He'd done that too—gone back home. To the house where he'd lived with his sire and dam and their pack, before he'd been sold. He'd gone back twice, once before the virus, when he was just trying to run away, and once after, when he was looking for survivors. There hadn't been anyone left who wanted him, either time.

He supposed he could write that. He could tell Nick, his new alpha, that there was nobody in the world who wanted Max. Which wouldn't necessarily make him more appealing to keep around, and the last thing he wanted was for Nick to start wondering about what was wrong with Max that nobody else wanted him, in addition to all the obvious things. But he was already taking too long to answer the question. He wrote, before he could overthink it: **There's nobody.**

Nick nodded. Accepted it, and wrote: **Everybody left has lost. In all the looking for our families since the collapse, we never found anyone alive.**

Max shuddered. He hadn't really needed to go inside the house that second time. He could smell it, from out on the street.

Nick had to move the pack's notebook directly into Max's vision—he'd somehow zoned out, instead of paying attention. His anxiety flared at the lapse, and then he read what Nick was trying to say. It was another question: **Can I put my arm around you?**

Max wanted it. That was his immediate reaction, that he wanted it. But he sat frozen, stuck in trying to game out where this might be going, what accepting this might mean. He didn't think he *should* say no to his alpha, but maybe he could. But did he even want to say no? Not really. He froze long enough that Nick called across the camp, and Isaac beelined over to them.

Chattering and fussing, the omega inserted himself between them, throwing one arm around his mate and the other around Max. It was such a relief, an order of magnitude easier, to accept comfort and closeness from another omega. He could allow himself to tip towards Isaac, who started rubbing his arm immediately. Max even let himself close his eyes, as he sank into it.

Max didn't sleep, the night before the job. After that first night of hard crash-out, he hadn't managed to sleep much, in a bed with other people and up against an alpha. He caught a few hours here and there, and he knew it wasn't sustainable but couldn't quite figure a way out of it. It was the pack leads' call, and they wanted him between them, so that was where he went. He could usually slide into a half-aware state that wasn't really sleep, but at least had some rest value. Every time one of the others moved in the night, he dropped back to sharp awareness, and had to make himself fade out again. He wanted to tell himself that eventually he would adapt to this, but the truth was that he'd gone on like this for two years in his second pack after he'd been sold. Even the nights when nobody used him, he never really adjusted to sleeping in the bed with them. That had been one of the many wonderful things about being on his own: getting to actually sleep, for the first time since he was a child.

The morning of the Kansas City job, Max flicked his gaze to the nearest member of the pack, and gestured from himself to the RV door with the question on his face. Today it was Johnny, barely above him in the hierarchy but still sufficient to give permission. Johnny pursed his lips slightly, and nodded, waving for Max to go outside.

This close to a metropolitan area, it didn't smell so much like trees. They were parked behind a big box store, not by a creek. Last night's campfire had been in half of a sawed-open barrel in the parking lot, but it had already been decided that it would draw too much attention to light a fire during the day.

The pack minus Nick and Isaac sat down around it anyways, and Wes started cutting thick slices out of what looked like a large, greasy brick. Max had seen them making these bricks some days earlier from smoked meat, dried berries, and what looked like some type of animal fat, but he wasn't sure what it was.

Can Max eat pemmican? Wes gestured at Pete, hesitating in front of Max.

Max managed to drop his eyes away from the food, but he couldn't stop the little stumble to his heart rate when Pete shook his head, and Wes skipped Max in the food handout. He folded his hands in his lap, and tried to project *well-behaved,* his mouth opening just slightly to scent for anything amiss. They were all keyed up, but more than usual? More than what was to be expected? He couldn't tell.

A small amount probably wouldn't put him into danger, but his stomach would be pretty upset by meat at this stage. Where'd we stick the leftover rice—and where's our notebook?

Yeah, can someone grab the notebook? Wes's tone was a little plaintive. *He's doing the thing where he doesn't look at us, and it kinda makes me wanna die.*

I got it. Johnny went back to the RV. He was back in seconds with the green-covered notebook, but now Max sat up completely straight, scenting again. Johnny smelled like—no, the air around Johnny, the air from when the RV door had been opened—it smelled like sex.

He'd seen members of the pack fuck three times, in his four days of observing before he'd given himself to them. Logan and Pete had had a lazy, early-morning session in the bedrolls

by the campfire—notable, for an alpha to pick a beta when there were two available omegas. Then he'd seen Wes take Johnny on his lap in the cab of the RV, bouncing him until Max could hear the omega's whimpers from his hiding place across the clearing. Also good to know, that Nick let the betas use his omegas, too. Lastly, and interestingly: when Nick and Isaac had wandered a little ways away from camp, and Isaac had blown his alpha.

Max had always thought it was stupid that it was called a blowjob in his second pack, where he'd first been fucked. He'd complained about it to the other omegas, back when he could talk, that it didn't make any sense to say that he, Max, had given a blowjob, or sucked somebody off, or any of the other ways they talked about it. Because Max wasn't especially doing anything, he was mostly just snatching down breaths when they let him have air, and trying to avoid gagging so much he'd throw up. Later, in other packs, sometimes there would be men who would just sit there at first, after they put it in his mouth. He hadn't really known what they wanted, for all they'd slap him and try to move his head with their hands, before they started fucking his face.

But spying on Nick and Isaac was like watching a different act. Nick, half-reclined against a tree, had put his hands on Isaac's shoulders, not his head. Isaac had been the one moving, sliding his mouth up and down, slow but relentless. He'd been the one setting the pace, sometimes pulling off to use just his tongue in a way that made Nick moan. What's more, the omega never made sounds like he was really choking. He never twisted and squirmed and fought to be let up to breathe, because he wasn't being held down at all. Nick had barely even thrust his hips until the very end.

It had been something of a revelation, that maybe those other alphas had wanted Max to be the one to move, and not just be still and take it. 'Be still and take it' had been what was expected of him in his second pack, before the virus when he still had enough language to understand orders. Max had been pretty terrible at that, so he didn't have much hope that he'd be better at pleasing this alpha in a way that hadn't even occurred to him before.

But. It really didn't seem that bad, as sex went. Isaac had worked himself with his free hand until he'd come, apparently with full permission. Nick had even kissed him afterwards.

To his deeper surprise, Max had gotten hard from watching. Usually when other people were involved, Max couldn't become aroused without someone else's hands on him, driving him to it despite his fear. He couldn't really remember a time when he'd been around another omega getting fucked, and felt much beyond concern. Or maybe, sometimes: guilty relief, that it wasn't Max.

But this hadn't especially looked like another omega getting fucked.

Max had noticed, with concern, that they'd all stopped having their regular encounters once he'd arrived. It hadn't been much more than a week, but still. Max had never known alphas to wait that long for sex. This pack had three available omegas now, and he already knew that the alphas fucked the betas and the betas the omegas as well. It had been alarming to him on several levels that they'd stopped, but it had seemed like a problem beyond his scope. He was busy trying to be unobtrusive, obedient, and helpful. All he could do was worry, pointlessly and on the back burner from his many other worries, about the men becoming frustrated and aggressive.

So it was with mixed emotions, that he scented Isaac and Nick and the musk of their coupling. He was concerned about Isaac, of course. Part of him was glad that whatever had changed by his arrival was perhaps back to normal for the pack, even if he couldn't help being scared about what that would mean for him. He was still pretty sure it would be fine, as sex went, but he wouldn't really know until they'd fucked him, and that seemed to be pending on some obscure timeline he couldn't quite figure out.

And, if he was being honest: he was a little curious about Isaac and Nick. After watching them before, he wondered what else they did differently from what he was familiar with. What else might be expected of him, when they finally got around to it.

He'd tried to have a notebook conversation with Wes about it, figuring a beta might be more forthcoming about what the alphas wanted, especially given that this pack's betas also serviced the alphas.

We can talk about that when you're ready, Wes had said.

I'm ready now, Max had answered. The more days they spent dancing around it, talking about his *choices* and his *consent* , the less secure he felt in his role in the pack. They barely even let him work, always so preoccupied his health and capacity—if they also didn't fuck him, how was he supposed to be earning his place?

I'd be good for it, he'd assured Wes. **You wouldn't have to hold me down or anything.**

That had been the wrong thing to say, what with the way Wes's scent became muddled with distress. Johnny had come over to intervene, while Wes had gone for a walk.

Nobody here is going to force you, Johnny had written, after reading over the previous conversation.

I'm trying to say they won't have to, Max had replied, a little frustrated. **How did you get them to use you, when you joined the pack?**

Johnny had looked at him for a long moment, chewing his lower lip. **It's a different attitude here,** he'd written eventually. **Not like the packs you've been in before. Did you ever read stories growing up? About alphas and omegas in love?**

Sure, Max said. He didn't write, 'it's bullshit,' in case one of the others were to read his notebook. But he made a face, to convey it, and Johnny gave him a small smile.

Yeah I know. But it's more like that here. Nobody has sex with each other unless they want to. Because they like the person. Not just because they want to get off/an omega is available. He paused for a moment, and rolled the pen in his fingers as he chose his words. **They would consider that kind of sex to be dishonorable.**

Max had chewed on that for a minute, thinking it through. **So when I'm offering myself when we don't have that kind of storybook relationship, I'm offending their sense of romanticism?**

Johnny had made a face. Max saw that face a lot on him, when they had these exchanges: consternation, hesitation. **That's one way to put it. My point: it'll be better if you stop offering. It'll happen naturally if it's going to happen.**

Max went up the page, and underlined **How did you get them to use you,** to reiterate the question.

Johnny nodded, and wrote: **I was very injured when I came to the pack. I didn't touch anybody like that for months. Pete and I have still never slept together and we probably never will, he says he just doesn't see me like that. I mostly sleep with Wes. Or with Nick and Isaac together. Logan in the right situation. And that's okay. It's not use like we're serving them in that way. There's not the expectation. It just is.**

He clicked the pen a few times, hesitating once again, before he added, **Did you ever do anything with other omegas? In your previous packs. Not because anybody made you or was watching.**

Max shook his head, and shot a quick glance around the camp. He had the impulse to reach out, and cover the words Johnny had written, so nobody else would see them. Instead, he wrote, **No, of course not.**

It's okay, Johnny wrote. The other omega's face blanked out, the way it sometimes did. He must have been able to tell that Max felt a little accused of something, though, because he underlined it, and then patted his own upper chest with his open palm, a gesture that they'd loosely worked out to mean sincerity.

Now, he sat next to Max beside the cold, dead barrel-campfire, and was offering a paragraph about something called pemmican and its meat content. Max looked at it, and it took him a long moment to realize that they were talking about breakfast. The RV was starting to creak just slightly, and Max could feel sweat starting to prickle up under his arms.

They were sorry about the cold rice, the paragraph said, but he would get sick if he ate the meat. Max read through it several times, and noted a little distantly that he was having trouble taking in information. One of the others retrieved a mug of rice they'd apparently saved from the night before, and put it in his hands.

Max fumbled with his pocket notebook, as he caught a low moan issuing from the RV. He turned to page eight—**I understand**—and tapped the paragraph Johnny had written about breakfast.

He's really upset. Wes's tone was concerned, and it set Max even more on edge, because Wes would know to be concerned, wouldn't he? He'd know what Nick was like, in bed. *What did you say? Did you say we were sorry he couldn't have the pemmican? Tell him it's not even good, he's not missing anything.*

It was very muffled, like someone had his face turned into a pillow, but rhythmic cries had joined the creaking. Nick was fucking Isaac, roughly enough to make the omega sound like *that,* and right before they were going on this job where there would be so much pressure on Isaac's shoulders. Max's stab of pity was laced with fear.

Nick had, at every turn, seemed to care about every member of the pack, but especially Isaac. Max had watched the way their alpha looked at his mate, and he could almost believe that this was something like love, for the two pack leads. And of course an alpha was entitled to his omegas, but to do this now? When Isaac had been up for half the night anyways, sleepless with anticipation for the day to come? It seemed cruel.

I don't think he's upset about the food. Johnny's voice was soft. *Do you think he can smell them, in the trailer? I could only smell it when I went in there to get the notebook.*

Ah shit, Sarge was right. Look at him.

Max made himself small almost reflexively, hunching forward as he shoveled the cold rice into his mouth. Now that he was keyed into it, hyperaware, he could smell when Nick finished, and knotted. That deepened the horror gathering in his gut—there wasn't a reason to knot an omega who was already pregnant. He felt his own throat tightening, to think of it. Isaac would be sore for the rest of the day, and anyone who came close enough would be able to smell Nick on him. He supposed that perhaps that was the point—Nick was marking his property, in advance of working with other people outside the pack. He must want Isaac to smell *fucked* to everyone else, and not just look it, with the bite marks on his neck and his swelling belly.

At least now, there was something Max could do to be useful. He hated himself a little bit, for seeing an upside to someone as kind as Isaac being treated this way. But Max knew how to do this part, the aftercare. He could get Isaac cleaned up and put back together, the way he'd done for other omegas hundreds of times. The way other omegas had done for him.

We've already told him that nobody'll touch him.

Doesn't make him not worried about it, though. Obviously.

Don't 'obviously' me, I'm trying to figure out what else we can say to him!

It wasn't a particularly long tie, maybe ten minutes. The other members of the pack seemed to bicker with each other, and Johnny wrote to him, **It's okay,** but mostly Max tried to ignore them. Unless one of them wanted a turn with him, he was going to be focused on Isaac until this was over.

A few minutes later, he could hear them getting up inside the trailer. Nick would probably come out, and then Max could get inside and go to Isaac. He heard footsteps, but could tell by the rhythm that it was Isaac coming down the RV steps. And when he spoke to the others, his tone was bright as ever.

Max knew he was staring, being rude, but he kept looking for what had to be wrong. Isaac wasn't moving like he was hurt, and he didn't smell like he was in pain either. He looked more relaxed than he had last night, and after chatting with the others for a moment, he collected his food and came to sit with Max.

Max pressed his thigh against Isaac's, the worry bleeding into his scent. But Isaac just leaned over, planted a kiss on Max's temple, and went about his breakfast.

The only person other than Max who seemed distressed was Johnny. He kept looking at Max and Isaac, then away again, then back. Max couldn't watch people from under his hair anymore, half-hiding, not with this new haircut. So he just kept his head down, and watched Johnny out of the corner of his eye. Saw him scent the air.

Nick emerging from the trailer was something like a signal, to the rest of the group. He said something, gestured, and the others stood, and began to board the RV again. Max let Johnny snag him, and guide him into the bench in the trailer's kitchen, where they were joined by Logan and Wes. Four people couldn't really fit, but they crammed together, while Nick and Isaac took the front seats and Pete folded down the spare seat by the RV's cabin.

It was a very short drive–they hadn't camped very far from their rendezvous point. The restlessness among the group increased, as the men armed up. Max had seen them dress for a fight before, as it was part of their typical scavenging precautions, and it didn't unsettle him any less now than it did at first. He wrung the strap of his messenger bag, and tried to avoid being noticed. He listed the things about this that were good, while Nick got on the radio: they'd fed him again. Isaac didn't seem hurt, or even subdued. He was wearing his boots now, so he could run more easily if trouble started. Max rocked his feet back and forth, feeling the way the boots hugged his foot, feeling the floor of the RV beneath him. If there *was* trouble, running would be his best bet. They hadn't given him back his knife.

Everyone listened intently as a new voice came over the radio, and several of the men shot glances at each other. Max tried to judge from their expressions what was being said: Pete's eyebrows pinched, Johnny pressed his lips together, Logan outright scowled. When the person on the radio stopped talking, Logan started, making choppy little gestures with the hand that wasn't resting on his rifle. Whatever he had to say made the whole pack start talking at once, until Isaac hushed them. Nick passed the radio to Isaac, who spoke into it for a moment, and then they all listened intently to the reply. Isaac and Nick passed the radio back and forth several times, communicating with the person on the other end. Then, they lapsed into quiet.

Nick in the driver's seat leaned, so he could see more of the assembled group. He started with something that from its cadence was a question, and Logan and Pete each replied in turn. The scent rising among the pack was one of anxiety, displeasure.

Eventually, they seemed to come to an agreement, and all filed out of the RV. They were on the grounds of what looked like some kind of industrial center, and a door opened to an adjacent warehouse. The pack approached as a group, Nick in front. The man in the doorway was broad, an alpha dressed in grimy jeans and a worn flannel, and he greeted them with an air of caution. Then they were ushered inside.

The change in light was substantial, and it took Max's eyes a moment to adjust. They went down a darkened hallway, and then were taken through a series of rooms within the building. Max got the sense that they were being given a tour–here was a professional kitchen, in dire need of cleaning. Here were a series of conference rooms which had been converted into barracks. Here was a cavernous storage area, stacked with supplies. These, too, could stand to be better maintained–a number of plastic totes were open and scattered all over the walkways between shelves. They passed a forklift on its side, overturned.

Their host talked to them as they went, and Nick primarily replied for the pack. Max tried to stay close to Johnny, more or less in the middle of the group. When they came to an auto bay and encountered several more alphas and betas, the tension in the pack ratcheted up. Max could read it in Isaac's posture, in the irritated, incredulous tone of Logan's voice as he started speaking, in the way Nick shifted his weight. Max couldn't help but eye the exits, as his pack talked something through with the other group.

Then, they were walking back the way they'd come, and returning to the RV. Max had to admit, he hadn't missed this part of being in a pack, the part where he never knew what the fuck was going on. He stood by, useless, while the others unpacked strange equipment from their storage containers. Then they returned to the auto bay within the warehouse, making several trips to move gear.

One of the stranger betas approached Max, as the pack started setting up their equipment. The man had a noticeably uneven beard, and he had tan lines from wearing a backwards baseball cap across his forehead. He said something, and Max ducked his head, panicking a little before Johnny swooped in to speak. Then Johnny was nudging him, and Max followed him, shooting a look of trepidation over his shoulder at Nick as the stranger beta started leading them away. Nick gave a nod, permission and order all in one gesture, and Max fell in behind Johnny.

He was a bit relieved, when they were taken back to the filthy kitchen instead of one of the bedrooms. Johnny seemed more annoyed than anything, enough to talk back to the beta, until the other man got in his face and raised his voice. Johnny's scent spiked with fear almost as fast as Max's did, and Max grabbed Johnny's wrist and pulled at him lightly, trying to get him to back down. Johnny followed the movement, letting Max tow him further into the kitchen, away from the beta. The beta's body language faded from aggressive to dismissive, and he turned his back to them, walking off while Johnny was still talking.

Then he closed the kitchen door behind himself, and Max heard the *thock* of the lock. It sent the hair raising up on the back of his neck, to be locked in again. The worst version of what this could be immediately clammered to the forefront of his mind: the two of them were being held in here, while the rest of their pack was being killed, and when that door opened they would be the new pack's property. He found himself holding his breath, listening, straining to hear shots. No such thing came, and after a minute he had to make himself inhale, exhale, again and again until it stopped being forced.

He needed to pull himself back from this edge. This wasn't even the most likely scenario, it was just something he'd lived before, and somehow expected to happen again. He needed to just…not think like that. It couldn't be an option. He couldn't keep going if that were true, so it couldn't be true. Max had to choose not to entertain the idea, because they needed to get through this. They, himself and Johnny, a unit of two. He felt his breathing coming shallow, but he wasn't alone in here, couldn't afford to spiral.

Max could see Johnny simmering with frustration, and he slid his grip from Johnny's wrist to his hand, interlacing their fingers and squeezing. Johnny's shoulders dropped, and he turned towards Max, who brought his other hand up to hold Johnny's shoulder.

He saw it happen, looking into Johnny's eyes. The thing he'd just done, played out on another person's face at close range. Fury and helplessness, untenable–and then gone. Shoved away. Johnny ran his free hand through his hair, and when Max nodded at him, to say something along the lines of, 'yeah, good, keep it together, I got you,' he nodded back. Cast a glance over his shoulder at the locked door.

Max squeezed his hand again, and then let go, gesturing for Johnny to follow. He led him to the far end of the kitchen, and they sat on the floor, where one of the two enormous island prep bars would hide them from view. Max pulled out his notebook, and then paused. He didn't have a sense of what was going on. Maybe this was how jobs normally went, with everybody in the pack stressed out. Maybe it was normal for them to be separated, and locked up. But maybe it was too dangerous to write certain things out, where someone else could read it.

He flipped through his sketchbook, and found close enough to the words he wanted, already written on one page albeit not as one sentence. He tapped the two phrases in sequence: first **the job** and then **is bad** and then a question mark.

Johnny hadn't been looking. His eyes were a little out of focus, and Max leaned in, to draw eye contact. Johnny looked down at the sketchbook and frowned, and Max figured he was waiting to be shown new writing. Max just tapped again, spelling out his question: **the job is bad?**

Johnny nodded once, and then gestured to the messenger bag. Max withdrew the green pack notebook, which they'd decided he could carry for the time being, and passed it to him with a pen. Johnny picked up on the game immediately. It was slow going, one or two words at a time with turning of pages, but he tapped out: **not the same people we talked to on radio before.**

Max felt a sinking, in his chest. He found and tapped the word, **who?**

Johnny's slow reply: **we talked to four members pack but none here now I don't know.** He shook his head and tapped the last phrase again: **I don't know.**

Max nodded slowly. He tapped: **they say what happen to four?**

Johnny answered: **say go supplies.** His expression was drawn tight. **Say come later.** He turned to a new page in the notebook, and wrote, **Nick said you and I could start going through this pack's supplies. We need to sort out what we're packing out with us at the end of the job. I do this every time. It's not like I have any training to help them with the bombs. But Roger just took us here and said to clean the place up + make lunch.**

He chewed his lip, and then started a new page. Max almost objected to it, since there was space left on the previous page, but then he realized Johnny was writing out the alphabet in letters an inch apart, instead of words. He nodded when Johnny glanced at him, and then Johnny started tapping the letters to spell out words, as if it were a keyboard. It went faster like this, the two of them sitting side by side, than it had been with flipping pages and looking for full written words. Johnny tapped out, **LOGANWANTSUSTOLEAVE**

Max nodded again, and reached for the pen. Below the alphabet, he drew a little box and wrote **space** in it, like a space bar, and he added a question mark. Then in letters he asked, **ISAAC WANTS US TO STAY AND NICK SIDED WITH ISAAC?**

A small smile pulled at the corner of Johnny's mouth. He spelled, **YEAH YOU GET IT**

Max maybe got 30% of it, 40% if he was being generous about it. He couldn't understand what they said, but from their body language and from what they'd written to him, it seemed like Nick rarely denied Isaac anything. Alphas got like that sometimes, when their omegas were carrying. Max had seen it twice before, in his second pack when omegas had conceived. Doting and favors, attention and allowances. He didn't think it was *just* that, though, in Isaac's case, because the rest of the pack listened to him, too. Maybe the influence Isaac seemed to hold was down to how educated he was.

He wrote out: **Okay, thank you for explaining. We should start cleaning now, this place is a mess and it will take awhile to even make enough space for prepping lunch.**

Johnny's mouth pressed thin again. Max knew he didn't want to do it, wanted to get out of here and go back to the pack and the shelter of their alpha's presence and authority. That beta, Roger, wouldn't have dared order another alpha's omegas around in front of him. That he'd felt comfortable doing it in private boded badly for their stay here, but then again, so did everything that had happened thus far. Besides, they might as well try and take control of the food.

They stowed the notebooks back in Max's messenger bag, and then in gestures formed a plan of attack for the kitchen. It was a large space, with sinks, ovens, stoves, and prep counters arranged along two walls and two islands that ran the length of the room, four long parallel bars of surfaces. The room smelled sickly sweet, fetid. There were easily a hundred dirty bowls, plates, and cups, and about as much dirty silverware, piled haphazardly everywhere. It wasn't all especially old–Max had broken into enough houses of the dead to know what dishes sitting for months to years looked like, and none of this mess was older than maybe two weeks.

They picked one of the long workstations against a wall, and removed everything removable, adding to the piles on the other counters. They found sponges, rags and cleaning agents, and somewhat miraculously the water from the first faucet they tried ran. By the time they had the sink, counters, and stovetop scrubbed down, Max was so exhausted he had to sit on the floor for a little bit. He sat with his back to the wall, his heart hammering from the exertion, and watched as Johnny started rummaging through the cabinets and storage racks, searching. He wasn't expecting Johnny to actually find food, but he did: oils and spices first, and then cans, tins, boxes. It was a little surreal, like something from before, to watch him pull ingredients out of kitchen cabinets.

That the kitchen was stocked left two possibilities: either these people had recently arrived and the place had been abandoned, or it was being continually occupied and cared for. That the faucet worked pointed to the latter option, and also indicated that there was some city infrastructure still functioning, also presumably maintained by somebody. If they found fresh produce, that would be a clear indicator.

Max pushed himself up as soon as he could manage it, and started looking for fruit and vegetables. He found a large, heavy door set into the corner on the other side of the room, and he tried to work out how to open it. There was a latch and a handle, and he strained against it, eventually hauling the door open. The chill and the smell hit him at the same time, and he realized he was looking at an enormous refrigerator. There was indeed *some* fresh produce in here–Max stuck his head in, and peered around. Much of it was going bad. He spotted a bin of sludge that looked like it used to be lettuce, and another moldy tray of what could have been zucchini. He backed out, and closed the door behind him, relatching it.

He leaned against the door, while he thought it through. It was winter, so for there to be lettuce and zucchini here, instead of things like carrots and potatoes, meant that somebody here or in the broader area was growing it indoors. Somewhere nearby were climate-controlled greenhouses, like some of the small, settled post-collapse communities ran with solar panels. Someone had prepped that food–sliced the zucchini, and then left it to go foul on a tray. The very idea that people would voluntarily allow food to go bad was repulsive to Max, so he had to assume that they hadn't come back because they couldn't. A group of people had lived and worked here, until they didn't.

He didn't have enough information on who they had been expecting to meet here, and how long it had been since the pack had communicated with them. But it seemed like a good bet that it had been roughly as long as it had taken the people here now to create all those dirty dishes, while the produce in the giant refrigerator went bad.

'Supply run' didn't make any sense, for a place this well-stocked. It was Max's bet that the pack here now had killed or run off the pack who had originally contacted Nick. Which meant Nick's pack was all in danger of being killed, themselves.

Max needed a weapon. He wanted a gun, but he'd take a knife for now. He drifted back to where Johnny was putting a very large pot of water on a burner. The flame clicked to life, which meant it was probably connected to a propane tank somewhere. With gestures, they established that there was running cold water, but no hot water, and that Johnny wanted to get some of the dishes done before they started cooking anything. Max got Johnny to follow him to the refrigerator and showed him its rotting contents, and Johnny's face went very flat.

While they waited for the water to boil, they got out the paper alphabet again. Johnny said: **I DONT LIKE THAT WE HAVENT SEEN ANY OF THEIR OMEGAS**

Max gave a little shake of his head: **THEY DONT HAVE ANY**

Johnny tapped the question mark, and Max elaborated: **THEY PUT US IN HERE TO CLEAN AND COOK IF THEY HAD OMEGAS THEY WOULD BE WORKING HERE ALREADY**

Max realized, a little bit ashamed of himself, that he was weighing how much to trust that Johnny understood, and how much he should spell out, and what was safe to talk about. He settled for asking questions. **HOW MANY PEOPLE SUPPOSED TO BE HERE?**

Johnny said, **I DONT KNOW AT LEAST THE FOUR WE TALKED TO**

Max asked, **HOW MANY OF THEM YOU COUNT?**

Johnny held up five fingers–that was good, that's the same number Max had clocked. And their pack was seven. He didn't know if Johnny could fight, but the others all had military training. While he himself was in horrible condition, Max could handle himself if he was armed. He had the thought that he wasn't even trying to get himself out of this, alone. He was thinking about their whole pack, and it had only been about a week.

Max asked, **OUR PACK WHO WANTS STAY WHO WANTS GO**

Johnny answered, **STAY NICK ISAAC PETE GO LOGAN**

Max pointed to Johnny, and raised his eyebrow to ask what he thought. Johnny gave a little shrug, and crossed his arms. Then he gestured to Max, asking what he thought.

Max hesitated. He wanted them all to leave while they still could, but he wouldn't question Nick's decisions outside the safety of his own mind, and didn't want to go against Isaac. He asked, **WES?**

Johnny shrugged again, and gestured at Max again, to repeat the question. When Max hesitated, Johnny said, **I WONT TELL**

Max chewed the inside of his cheek. This was so low stakes, and he believed Johnny when he said he wouldn't tell. **GO**

Johnny nodded, and his expression said he'd guessed as much. He said, **WE SHOULD SLEEP IN RV**

Max didn't want to think about being here long enough to have to decide where to sleep. He wanted to be away from the men he suspected were raiders more than he wanted to spend the night in a real building, but the whole question was a little ridiculous. They shouldn't sleep in the RV instead of in their hosts' accommodations, they should run.

The real questions here he didn't think Johnny could answer. If these interlopers were trying to take over this location, why entertain a bomb squad under false pretenses? There must really be a bomb in need of defusing, sure. But why wouldn't the raiders just leave, instead of playing through a charade? There must be some reason for them to want to hold this position, and not just evacuate. Something valuable here, or someone ordering them to stay, or someone expecting to meet them here.

And then there were the questions about the pack's behavior which Max couldn't risk asking Johnny. Was Nick–and Isaac and Pete, apparently–not understanding the situation here? Not seeing the danger? If the rest of the pack had identified that all was not as it had been presented, why weren't they already running? And why did they allow Johnny and Max to be separated from the rest of them, under these circumstances?

Something in his chest hurt, about that last part. All of this–Max giving up his freedom, and apparently not his body yet, but eventually–was supposed to be about having people to watch his back well enough to keep him alive. He was supposed to only have to watch out for what

the members of his own pack might do to him, while they kept him safe from outsiders. That was the goddamn deal that he'd made with them, the unspoken exchange all omegas made. Submission for protection. And until now, he hadn't seen this pack treat their omegas as disposable.

Best case scenario, Nick was too stupid to see the danger they were all in. Worst case scenario, this was confirmation that Johnny and Max were worth less than the other pack members, if not only because they were omegas, then because they didn't offer as much as Isaac could to their mission. Which was hard to take, because it wasn't a problem Max could solve by working harder or submitting better. His goal had been to get on level with Johnny, in their hierarchy. Trusted with all their daily work, trusted to handle weapons. Fed equally, used gently, and treated with affection. But here Johnny was with Max, both separated from the others and left vulnerable.

Max felt a tightness in his throat, a pressure in his face, and fuck, it was too early for that. He didn't have the leeway to be difficult. He tried to force it down, and was startled into flinching by a hand on his shoulder. He flicked his eyes up to find Johnny looking at him, the sympathy in his scent winding between them.

Johnny rubbed Max's shoulder for a moment, while Max tried not to cry. Then he said,
EVEN IF SLEEP HERE NICK WOULD NEVER SHARE YOU WITH OTHER PACK

Max hadn't even been worried about that. The fear hadn't been that Nick would make something like that happen, it was that in sending the omegas off like this he evidently might not care if it did. Or he was stupid, and believed the supply run story.

That was what had to be established, Max decided, as he shook Johnny off and got to his feet. Their water was steaming now, and he made a plan as they arranged themselves around the sink. His first order of business was to get himself a knife. Something small that he could hide on his body, probably in his boot. His next move would be to make sure Nick knew… what? That their hosts were probably a bunch of lying murderers, because of the state of their kitchen? It sounded ridiculous, when he thought about how he'd need to lay it out. It made him sound insane, untrustworthy. It's not like he could tell Nick that their host pack was treating Max and Johnny like omegas. Nick could take it as Max complaining, being workshy.

Then there was the problem of how to tell Nick anything at all. If he wrote it down, it could later be read by others, an inherently risky position. But he couldn't count on Nick sitting through the tap-spelling–Max would never have suggested it even to Johnny. Could he count on Johnny to share about the kitchen, and what it meant? That presupposed that Johnny understood what it meant.

Max was going to drive himself crazy like this. He curtailed step two of the plan to "figure out if Nick is stupid or not," and decided to come back to the details. He needed to focus on step one, for now.

Johnny picked the items he wanted clean for making lunch, and fed them to Max at the sink. His hands quickly went red from scrubbing with the near-scalding water, but gradually a

large pile of cleaned pots, pans, plates, cups, and utensils accumulated on the clean counter. Through gestures, Johnny told Max to keep working on the dishes while he started cooking.

The scraps from these dishes were too old and nasty for Max to chance, especially not when he had access to the rest of this well-stocked kitchen. But it wasn't food scraps he was most interested in, just then. As he boiled a second large pot of hot water, he went through the rest of the mess of dishes, and found a suitable paring knife. He made sure it was in the next batch he washed, and then when Johnny wasn't looking Max nicked the edge of a thin dish towel with the knife, cutting through where it was hemmed so he could tear off a strip. He wrapped it around the blade as a sheath, and hid the whole thing in his boot, the top of the handle hidden beneath the leg of his jeans.

A little tension went out of him, when he straightened back up. He'd cut himself open for this pack, made himself entirely vulnerable to them, and the press of the kitchen knife in his boot felt like the first stitch in the wound. Suddenly he was exhausted, felt the fatigue crash down on him so hard he leaned against the counter with both hands, trying to gather himself.

Johnny came over to him, both hands covered in flour, and gestured. At first Max thought he was telling him to get back to work, and he nodded, reaching for more dishes. But then Johnny gestured again, and got Max to follow him to one of the corners of the room. It was a storage space, a little annex off the main kitchen full of shelves. Johnny was pointing one floury finger at one in particular, at a large folded pile of towels. Then he mimed sleeping, and pointed to Max.

Max flushed, a little embarrassed, but he nodded. "Yeah, I don't think I have long on my feet," he said. Johnny nodded back, and waved his hand to say this was okay, little motes of flour falling from his fingers to the floor.

It was ridiculous and self-indulgent, but Max took some time to make himself a nest. He removed boxes and bottles from a lower shelf, shoving them elsewhere, and then covered the empty shelf with stacks of towels several inches thick. He found several boxes of thick black trash bags, and set them on the shelf above, pulling the bags half way out of the box so that they hung over the shelf below, as a sort of curtain. When he climbed into the shelf, he balled up, for warmth and so he could have one hand on the knife in his boot. He wished he had blankets, but it wasn't especially cold, now that Johnny was preheating an oven–preheating an oven!–just a few feet away.

It was so much easier to fall asleep like this. Curled up and hidden and semi-alone in a space he'd arranged, not stretched out between his pack leaders. Armed again, finally, even with a little kitchen knife. Max fell asleep the fastest he had in what felt like a long time.

Of all things, he dreamt of being in the RV bed, with Nick and Isaac and Johnny. He'd spent a lot of hours like that lately, lying awake while they slept, so maybe it made sense that it would come up in his dreams. He didn't dream of the bad parts, the time he spent anxious and bracing himself. No, in the dream it was just the good parts, where they cuddled and pet him, their hands gentle in his hair and on his neck, their warm bodies curled around him.

In waking, he usually slept with Isaac against his back, his front pressed against Nick, with Johnny on the outside. But in the dream, he was on the other side of Isaac, turned with

Johnny warm at his back instead. Nick was there too, behind Isaac, but he didn't feel threatening. And there Isaac was in front of him, their legs tangled together, faces inches apart. Max reached, and pulled Isaac closer, running his hand down Isaac's back–for some reason Isaac wasn't wearing a shirt, as he usually did to bed, and so Max was touching his bare skin, felt the soft glide of it. Isaac pet him in return, his hand on Max's head rubbing his palm over the sensitive, newly exposed skin of Max's scalp like he had during the haircut. It made something in Max wild and he arched himself forward, first his lips finding Isaac's lips, and then his hips grinding forwards against Isaac's hips. Isaac kept petting him, stroking his head, kneading the back of his neck. And then Isaac reached between his legs, and Max whined. Max *wanted.*

A soft *tap tap tap* woke him, and Max's pleasure tumbled into panic. He jerked back, smacking into the wall behind him, and then tried to sit up, knocking into the shelf above him.

Johnny's voice: *Sorry, sorry, oh my god, sorry! Hey, you're okay, it's okay.*

Max groaned, and curled up even tighter, his arms coming up to wrap around his head. He'd hit the wall with his shoulder, but the upper shelf with his head, and the impacts reverberated through him for a minute, before they settled into ache. He scented the air, terrified of finding his own arousal evident, but it wasn't. Or, if it had been, it was now entirely swamped by his fear. He felt sick with it. Had he made any noise aloud? Did Johnny somehow know what Max had been dreaming of? And also–he scented again, and yeah, there was the beta from earlier, further off. Max needed to get up immediately. He'd been caught sleeping when they'd been told to work, and it wouldn't matter if Johnny had told him he could.

"I'm sorry," Max mumbled, extricating himself from the shelf. He got to his feet, and let Johnny put a stabilizing hand on his shoulder.

It's lunchtime, that's all. Johnny was saying something, his voice pitched calm and soothing. *Can you help me carry some things? I've got lunch for you too.*

Max let Johnny lead him out of the little storage annex, and back to the main kitchen. Roger the beta stood in the kitchen doorway again, arms crossed, unimpressed. He wouldn't be able to see back into the annex from there, and so maybe he didn't know Max had been sleeping. Maybe Johnny wouldn't tell. Actually, it was in Johnny's interest not to tell, because he could be punished too. Maybe if Max just kept his head down and didn't smell too guilty, he could get out of this.

What's wrong with him? Roger snapped.

Nothing, Johnny said, a little aggrieved. *I told you, he's a babel, he gets disoriented.*

This place is still nasty, what the fuck have you been doing in here?

What does it look like we've been doing in here? Johnny gestured to three trays, covered in plates of sandwiches. There were pickles too, and oven fries. Max was impressed–Johnny had baked bread, and a lot of it, to make this many sandwiches. He felt even guiltier, that he'd been slacking off while Johnny had worked this hard.

I'm going to tell your alpha how lippy you are, Roger said. *That mouth needs to be slapped. You talk back to your own pack like that? I don't think so. I bet he takes you over his knee. Think he'll let us watch?*

Max kept his head down, scenting, and he caught the spike of Johnny's fear. Whatever the beta was saying, Johnny seemed to ignore, instead motioning for Max to take one of the three trays. It seemed like they were getting out of the kitchen, which was good. They had to avoid getting locked up like that again, if at all possible. Maybe Johnny having done a good job with lunch would buy them a little trust, with these people.

Roger took the third tray, and escorted them back to the auto bay. They had a folding table set up, and Max felt a wave of relief to see Nick standing next to it, waiting for them, very much alive. The others, too: Pete and Wes straightened from where they'd been crouched over some assembled equipment, and two figures clad in what looked like strange, heavy green paneling emerged from the back of one of the trucks in the loading dock, removing their hoods to reveal themselves as Isaac and Logan.

Max ducked his head. He told himself he was just being deferential, and not avoiding looking at Isaac in particular.

Sandwiches? Are you kidding? Johnny, you're amazing, did you make these? Wes was his usual self, practically bouncing over as they set down the trays. Max took from that that either nothing was especially wrong here, or Wes was trying to cover.

Yeah. The kitchen has working gas, electric, water. The fridge is a mess, but there are a couple deep freezers with good stuff in them, and not all the produce was bad. We've got turkey, apple, and cheese, with mustard. No ketchup for the fries, sorry.

Wes whooped, and wrapped Johnny in a bear hug, but Nick was frowning. *What's wrong?* he asked, looking between Max, Johnny, and Roger.

You ought to teach that brat a lesson, Roger said, stabbing a finger at Johnny. *Between him running his mouth and the retard not knowing which way is up, it's a miracle anything got done.*

The temperature in the room seemed to drop precipitously, and Max was suddenly aware of his pack physically drawing together, as Pete, Logan, and Isaac joined their little circle around the table. The members of the other pack were filtering over too, from wherever they had been. Under his lashes, Max counted five of them, once again. Two alphas and three betas, hard men all, each of them visibly armed.

What? Wes asked, confused, as Nick stepped around the table, putting himself between Roger and Max, Johnny, and Wes.

You'll apologize, Nick said, his voice low, and both packs' discomfort rippled through the group.

What happened? Isaac asked, still stripping out of his protective gear.

I didn't hear, Logan answered, doing the same.

Roger, isn't it? Roger is going to apologize to Johnny and Max, Nick said, taking a half step to put himself in Roger's space.

Come on, now, said one of the other pack's alphas. *What was out of line?*

You're going to apologize, and you're not going to use that language again, Nick said. He wasn't yelling, he kept his voice low, but his words were heavy with anger.

Max couldn't tell what the conflict was about, but if Nick had been using that tone of voice on him, Max would have gone to his knees. It didn't seem to have the same effect on Roger, who looked to his own alpha, aghast.

If he says the omega's a brat, then the omega's a brat, the alpha said to Nick. He made a gesture, and seemed more confused than anything.

Wait, who's a brat? Isaac asked, shaking his head.

He called Johnny a brat and he called Max a– Wes started, but Nick cut him off.

Wes, you don't need to repeat it.

He called Johnny *a brat?* Isaac asked, even more confused than before.

He's going to apologize, or we're going to have to reconsider our work here , Nick said.

Nick! Isaac exclaimed, annoyed.

Are you serious? The other alpha asked.

Nick? Johnny said, his own voice almost a whisper. *Nick, he locked us in the kitchen. He locked the door.*

Several people started talking at once, and Isaac came around the table to grab Nick's arm, hanging on like he expected to be stopping Nick from advancing on Roger. Max cringed away from the group as they raised their voices at one another, and found himself tucked under one of Logan's arms. None of the pack usually ever touched Max without at least forecasting it, and so he was taken a little by surprise, but it wasn't bad. It was kind of the opposite of the dread and abandonment he'd felt in the kitchen, to be held close.

So, Johnny had told them…something. Maybe not the extent of Max's suspicions, maybe just about how Roger hadn't taken them where they were supposed to go. Nick looked pissed, radiated it, his alpha-fury rippling through his scent and making Max cower instinctually against Logan. The arm Isaac wasn't holding onto was gesturing, as Nick stabbed his finger at the beta.

The other pack's lead alpha put his hands up, a pacifying gesture, but whatever he said seemed to make things worse. Max ducked his head, watching from under his lashes as he

tried and failed to follow what was going on. He wished he could disappear, just melt away from all of this, and return when it was back to being just his own pack again.

Eventually, the voices and tempers cooled, as they worked out whatever the conflict was. Max and Johnny were ushered forward, and Roger the beta said something to them. Resentment and anger still tinged the air. Max just kept his head down, and hoped he wasn't supposed to somehow respond. Hoped somebody would explain what had happened, later, although he didn't really expect it.

The two packs began collecting their plates of food from the trays, with Johnny offering Max a small thermos of broth and a plate that had two slices of warm bread.

One of the other betas, not Roger, gestured to Max's plate. *What's he on punishment rations for? He's already thin as a stick.*

Did we not just establish that my omegas are out of your pack's purview? Nick snapped.

The beta nodded, and immediately backed off. *Yes sir.* But as the two packs split to eat at opposite ends of the auto bay, Max couldn't help but notice that the man–on the younger side, with a rough, stubbly red buzz cut–kept glancing over. And he wasn't just looking at the pack, he was looking at *Max.* Max didn't like it.

What he did like, was the bread. Max couldn't remember the last time he'd had bread. He took his time with it, chewing slowly, and he felt so wonderfully full by the time he'd finished. It was a struggle, even, to finish the last few bites and the last sips of his broth. Max wouldn't need to eat again today, maybe even *couldn't* eat again today, and he couldn't remember the last time that had happened, either.

Johnny gestured, and together they collected the pack's plates once everyone had finished. Isaac kept his plate and a second sandwich for later, but the rest of the dishes were piled back on the trays. The buzz cut beta collected his own pack's dishes, and he accompanied Max and Johnny back to the kitchen instead of Roger.

Max had a moment of panic, in the doorway to the auto bay. He didn't want the rest of his pack out of sight. Didn't want to go off with Johnny and another stranger who made him uncomfortable. But he had no way to communicate this, and even if he'd been able to say something, it wasn't his place to question what his alpha wanted.

And his alpha was currently turned away from them, as the rest of the pack refocused on their work.

Max made himself put one foot in front of the other, back to the kitchen. At least this beta didn't say things that made Johnny's scent zing with fear and anger, the way Roger had. This one hefted the dirty dishes to the sink, and then began filling the large pot of water, apparently at Johnny's direction.

Johnny waved Max over to the far corner of the kitchen, and gestured that he wanted to write. Max felt a rush of relief, as he pulled out the pack's notebook, and passed it over.

Johnny: **They are not allowed to lock us anywhere or tell us what to do. Nick made it really really clear. They are also not going to make us do stuff by ourselves to take care of everybody. This is Kelly and he is going to help us. Roger is not allowed to talk to us anymore. He apologized earlier. We're going to clean up in here and then look at their supplies.**

Max nodded that he understood, even though he figured this was maybe a tenth of what had gone on. The food was sitting heavy in his stomach, and he felt like he could use another nap as the three of them started on the mess in the kitchen.

As the day wore on into afternoon, Johnny got started cooking something else, while Kelly and Max went through with trash bags and removed the food that had gone bad. Kelly gave him a smile every time Max caught his eye, and Max quickly averted his gaze each time. He made a point to shy away when Kelly got close, and he just had to hope it wouldn't escalate.

Well. No, he didn't just have to hope. He had the knife in his boot now, and he could make sure it didn't escalate, if it came to that.

His pulse started kicking at him when Kelly hefted one of the trash bags, and gestured for Max to follow him with the other. Max turned, but Johnny was at the stove, absorbed. Fuck, he didn't want to be alone with Kelly, but he didn't know how to get out of this. Chewing his lip, Max hesitated for a minute longer. "Johnny," he said, and Johnny turned. What a miraculous thing that was, just by itself. He knew Johnny hadn't actually heard his name, but Max had spoken, and had somebody react.

Max gestured to the bags, and to Kelly at the door, thinking, please don't let me go off with him. Please tell me to stay here instead. But Johnny didn't read it from Max's face, just gave him a thumbs up, and turned back to the stove.

Gritting his teeth, Max followed. He spent the whole walk down the hallway trying to mentally will Kelly not to make a pass at him. They exited the building through a different door than the one the pack had entered through, and there was immediately a noticeable smell. Max associated that smell with the beginning of the pandemic, especially: quicklime, and underneath, the barely-perceptible hint of rotting corpses. It was so different from vegetable matter rotting, so specific. He'd first encountered it at the hospital, in the early days, while he was fighting the sickness and it was changing his body. He remembered asking what the new smell was, somehow both chalky and earthy, and had been told that there wasn't such a smell. Later, he'd seen it, in the grassy area across the parking lot from where his window had been: the open pits, the bodies covered in powder. He would never, ever misremember that smell. He tried not to panic as Kelly brought him over to a giant dumpster along the side of the building, but the closer they got, the more apparent it was that the smell was emanating from the dumpster.

Max's hands started to shake. He thought about bolting, but where to? Back to the pack? Could he even get inside the building, and find them now? He'd been worried about Kelly coming onto him, but now he was worried about getting put in that fucking dumpster with the other corpses.

The side of the dumpster was maybe seven or eight feet up, too tall to see into. Kelly had to swing and throw his trash bag over the side, and then he held out a hand, offering to do Max's as well. Max let him have the bag, and tried not to let the shaking of his hands show as he passed it over.

Kelly brushed his hands off on his pants, and Max waited for something to happen, his heart pounding in his ears. Kelly said something to him, but Mad kept his eyes firmly on the pavement, hunching his shoulders.

Kelly sighed, after a moment. He waved for Max to follow him, and went back into the building.

Max was so relieved about not going into the dumpster, about Kelly taking him back inside, that at first he didn't notice that Kelly wasn't taking him directly back to the kitchen. He felt too wrung out to really panic again, but he wished he could have a hand on his knife.

Max, like an idiot, followed Kelly through a door into what looked like an office that had been converted into living quarters. There was a mess of blankets in rough bed-shape in a corner, scattered clothing, various boxes and personal effects. He counted at least three guns on the nearest desk as he tried to back out of the room, but Kelly closed the door behind them before he could slip away.

"Please," Max started, shaking his head. "I know you don't understand me. But just–please. Please, don't. It's not even–my alpha–"

Kelly said something, and shook his head, frowning a little bit as Max backed up until he hit a wall. He reached into one of the large pockets on his cargo pants. Max cringed, expecting a weapon, only for Kelly to pull out…a handful of Johnny's oven fries.

It didn't look like a weapon, but that didn't mean it couldn't be used against him. Max pressed himself against the wall and met Kelly's eyes, shaking his head. He tried to plead his case with his expression, but Kelly just held out the oven fries, like Max was supposed to take them from his hand.

"I'm…I'm not going to bend over for some fries, man," Max told him, aware that his words were worthless. Aware that this is essentially what he'd already done, when he joined his current pack mere days ago.

Kelly, with his free hand, pointed to the fries, then to Max, then gave a thumbs up. God, so they were back to charades. Max shook his head, and then, in a gamble, he pointed to the blankets in the corner, and shook his head again, making an X with his hands.

Kelly's eyes widened, and he shook his head. He pointed to the bed, and shook his head, then gave a thumbs down. He pointed to the fries again, and gave a thumbs up, pointing between the fries and Max.

There was no way this was that simple. There was no way this man was just giving Max food, for nothing, with no strings attached. Max needed to get out of here, needed to get back to the relative safety of Johnny as witness and translator. He needed to tell his pack about the

bodies in the dumpster, needed to warn them. He just needed to get past Kelly, before this went really, really wrong.

Slowly, Kelly took a step, and put the fries on a desk. He took a step back, away from Max, and put his hands up. He said something, and Max hated this, hated his helplessness, his isolation. He hated the way he felt so frozen: Max couldn't make himself move enough to reach into his messenger bag for a notebook, didn't even want to show the notebooks to Kelly in case that caused something.

Kelly pointed to the shelving unit next to Max, and took a cautious step towards it. He was speaking now, voice low, and he moved slowly to pull a bin halfway out from the shelf. Max looked, despite himself, and was taken aback once more when Kelly moved the pile of shirts on top of the bin, to show him the collection of nonperishables hidden below. MREs, granola bars, a few cans. Max knew a stash when he saw one, and he really looked at Kelly for the first time, searching his face. Kelly was about his age, maybe a year or two older. This close, Max could see a scar running through his left eyebrow, and more small scars on his left cheekbone and around the left side of his mouth. There was one over the bridge of his nose, too.

Kelly pointed from the food to Max, back and forth a few times, and then gave a thumbs up. Then he pressed a finger to his lips.

"Yeah," Max said, nodding slowly. "It's a secret? I won't tell anybody. I mean, who would I tell?" He put a finger to his own lips, and nodded.

Kelly broke out in a crooked-toothed grin, and nodded back to him. Then he left the room, left Max by himself, faster than Max could get his thoughts together to follow.

Max took one deep breath, and then another. He let his shoulders come down, and took stock: their original hosts were probably dead in that dumpster, but the new hosts still wanted them to defuse the bombs. The pack might be so committed to the mission that they couldn't understand what was happening with enough clarity to leave, but he still had to determine that for sure. Among the other pack, one beta was a problem, but another might be an ally. It wasn't great, but Max had made it out of worse setups before.

He took two granola bars from Kelly's stash, and wolfed down the oven fries. Just a couple hours ago, he'd thought he wouldn't need more food, but he found enough appetite to polish off Kelly's dubious gift. Then he searched the rest of the room, more out of force of habit and curiosity than any specific interest in finding something.

But he did find something: one of the boxes, on the lower of the shelves, contained ammunition. And another contained four handguns, piled together.

Max knew he was taking too long in here, and might already be missed. It was an impulse decision: he grabbed one of the guns. Quickly he detached the empty magazine and racked the slide, checking that the chamber was empty. He racked it again, dry fired it, conducted a rapid inspection determining that it seemed to be in working order. At least, for his experience, he couldn't see anything wrong with it. Then he loaded the detached magazine, and slid it into place.

Part of his brain was howling at him something to the effect of, what are you doing, Max, what the hell are you doing, you're going to get caught. But like with the kitchen access earlier, he just could not pass up the chance to get his hands on a weapon, especially not now. The weight of it, the click of that trigger–it all made him a little less at everyone else's mercy, and there was no way he wasn't going to take the opportunity with both hands.

Keeping the safety on, he slid the now-loaded gun into his messenger bag, with the granola bars. He put them between the two big notebooks, so the print of the gun and the food wouldn't show against the cloth side of the bag. Then he straightened, slipped out the door, and made his way back to the kitchen with the new weight on his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

This story is still a gift for Coffeexandxangst. Also, fun update, we're dating now. Happy birthday, love.

Chapter 3: Kansas City, Part Two

Chapter Summary

> We close out this arc, with a bang.
>
> Happy birthday, Coffee, I gave Max a gun ❤️

Chapter Notes

> I went ahead and added the "graphic depictions of violence" and "rape/noncon" archive tags, as well as the following additions for this section: sexual assault, voyeurism, guns, violence.
>
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

After dinner, Max tried to blend in with the wall while the pack–his pack–huddled up for a conversation that didn't include him. It was impossible not to try and lip read, even though he never put anything together from it. He kept his head bowed but his eyes up, cataloging their body language as he did his best to be invisible.

Everyone was tense, that was for sure. Some more agitated than others; Isaac's demeanor was more insistent, while Pete came off as fatigued. None of them seemed especially concerned with Max, which was ideal, because he didn't want any of them to notice how sick to his stomach he'd become. The physicality of it was so strong that he knew the cramping and nausea must be from the extra food. There had been more broth and rice for dinner, and Max had taken kitchen scraps while they'd prepared it.

He was very familiar with the kind of stomach aches he got from anxiety, and that was a duller, more constant sensation than this twisting feeling. That other kind of ache had shown up like clockwork every night back in his second pack, and had never gone away during the time he'd spent in the shipping container. It was fear, and at the time he hadn't learned how to keep it out of his scent the way he could now. Not a problem in the shipping container, where it was expected for the imprisoned omegas to be afraid. A serious problem in his second pack where, as he understood it now, they were all supposed to be pretending that he wasn't functionally a prisoner.

He considered his new pack, opening his mouth slightly to scent them closer, and figured that they were something of a middle ground. It would be okay to smell afraid here, because it

could be attributed to the situation they were in. But the pack leaders had chosen this situation, for all of them, and so Max couldn't question it too blatantly even if he thought it was insane.

He found himself watching Nick, most of all. He knew he didn't want Nick watching him back, guessing that Max was stealing food or judging the decision to stay here. Or, worst of all, if Nick got the idea to search the bag slung over Max's shoulder. But he found himself staring at the side of Nick's head and thinking, look at me. Look at me anyways.

Nick was focused on whatever Logan was saying, a long flow of meaningless sound. But almost as if he'd felt Max willing him, he glanced in Max's direction. Max immediately dropped his own eyes, and hunched his shoulders a little more, projecting submission. He stayed like that until long after he was sure Nick had looked away, even though it meant giving up watching the others talk.

Max had to calm down. Another wave of pain gripped his abdomen, and he breathed through it, annoyed at himself. There was a sliver of him that was angry with Nick for keeping them here, for letting the omegas be separated and threatened, and he couldn't let that feeling grow. He had to crush it, because the truth was that Max *was* the most disposable member of the pack, and having feelings about it wasn't going to change anything. He needed to assess how much Nick understood about their hosts, to be able to gauge how badly Nick was fucking up as their leader. To gauge if Max needed to run.

Another stomach cramp. He wrung the strap of his messenger bag, trying to ground himself. If Max was being honest with himself, he knew that running right now wasn't a good option. He was still too weak from starvation, and a raider pack having taken this warehouse boded badly for the stability of the surrounding area. But if it was a choice between running, and belonging to the raider pack after they'd killed Nick–

Max shook off this line of thought as the rest of the pack shifted, and got themselves together to leave the auto bay. He hoped that they were going back to the RV, but they split up, and Nick beckoned Max and Wes to follow him up a set of stairs and into an office space.

Max didn't have the upper body strength to participate in moving the desks around, but he moved trash cans and stacks of files and other small items, as they rearranged the cubicles to create a large sleeping area in the back of the room. A den, of sorts. The others made multiple trips carrying blankets, sleeping bags, and even a pair of mattresses that looked and smelled new, like they'd been wrapped in plastic. As they arranged it all into one giant nest, Nick beckoned Max again, and gestured until they both sat side by side in the far corner.

He made the motion with his hand like he wanted to write, and Max took off the messenger bag. He didn't need to take it off to pull the notebooks out, but he maneuvered so that he could tuck the not-actually-empty bag and its stolen contents between the small of his back and the wall, and out of sight.

Nick opened the pack notebook, and wrote: **Big day today. We're thinking another 3-4 days here after all. How are you doing?**

Max rolled his own pen between his fingers, his notebook propped open on his lap. One of the many problems here was that anything he wrote could be later read by others, and if their hosts were about to turn on them, it would go badly for Max if they read him trying to get Nick to…he didn't actually know. Get the fuck out of here? Make a move first? And then, of course, there was the matter of just *how* stupid Nick was. How much Max had to spell it out, how little it would matter. He just didn't understand Nick's decision making, so he didn't know how best to share information or craft an appeal.

But he had to start somewhere, and there was no telling if he'd ever get another chance. He went with the most critical thing first: **Sir there are bodies in the dumpster out back.**

Nick hesitated. Max watched with careful attention as his alpha grimaced, and nodded. **They mentioned that they were attacked by raiders quite recently. It's not how I'd treat remains in my own territory.**

Max took a second to think about this, to consider if he was leaping to conclusions that weren't justified. Could there be an explanation for all of this, that wasn't what he assumed? His working theory was that the original pack who had controlled this warehouse had been deposed and dumpstered by raiders who had taken their place, in order to…he wasn't sure exactly, but they must have some ultimate purpose related to the weapons in the auto bay. It was useful to these people, to have the bomb squad come anyways. Useful to the point of pretending to be from the same pack as the people they'd killed, in order to get the bomb squad to complete their mission.

The previous pack hadn't just lived here, they'd cared for the place extensively, to the point of maintaining utilities at what was necessarily serious trouble. And their fridge was full of fresh produce out of season, meaning they had connections with a place that was growing food in some kind of indoor farming setup. But the produce was spoiled and the living spaces trashed, which just didn't track with how hard it was to have electricity, running water, and zucchini in December.

What other explanations could there be? Dead raiders in the dumpster, and a general neglect for their kitchen? No. Max might not have the whole picture, but he wasn't wrong about how fucked up things were here. He would have run, as soon as the people speaking over the radio were different from the people he'd arranged to meet. He couldn't understand why the pack hadn't.

If the dead bodies in the dumpster didn't make an impression on Nick, he didn't think the lettuce would, but he had to try. He wrote: **There was a lot of fresh produce in the kitchen that had gone bad. The kitchen is a mess. The whole place is a mess sir.**

Nick hummed, and responded: **You are not here to pick up after them. That is not your job. Your job is just to be a member of this pack, which means contributing in ways that are appropriate for your current condition. Johnny says you took a nap earlier**

Max's throat tightened, but before he could react, Nick went on: **and I want to say that's good, I want you to rest as much as you need to.**

His stomach wrenched unpleasantly. Max was too cowed to do anything like rolling his eyes, but he felt like it, in a kind of psychological whiplash. A second ago he'd been ready to try and–what, exactly? Get out of trouble, whatever that looked like. But now he was back to being annoyed, because were they really doing this again, now? This wasn't about him pushing his limits trying to make himself valuable to them, and anyways, he was of the mind that they ought to stop being weird about it and let him work.

He tried again: **Sorry sir I mean to say that they let it get that bad. They had fresh food, and they let it go bad. People don't just act like that, it means something's wrong.**

Nick: **I can see why you would feel that way especially after what you've been through.**

Max clenched his teeth, because this wasn't about that, either.

Nick kept writing: **Especially these days it can be hard to watch other people making survival decisions that we wouldn't make.**

Max could have banged his head against the wall behind him, if he didn't have so much riding on appearing to have his shit together. They were talking past each other, and he didn't know how to fix it without being insubordinate. Nick's alpha proximity was nearly a physical force, and there was a level below conscious action where Max couldn't stop bracing himself. His stomach twisted again.

Max wrote: **Yes sir.** He spun the pen in his fingers for a moment, trying to figure it out. He felt like he was failing at something crucial, but what more was there to say? Nick already knew that Max didn't trust their hosts, because Max only barely trusted his own pack.

Nick: **I appreciate how closely you pay attention and how much you care about this pack. Even though you've only been with us a short time, we care about you too.**

Max suddenly went lightheaded, and he felt his nausea spike like his stomach might be about to come up. He shivered, clammy and cold and distinctly miserable. This conversation was repulsive, which was kind of novel in and of itself since having conversations again was still shiny and new. But the basic thing happening here, being lied to, was familiar. Being lied to about *this* would have been enough to make him sick without any help from the oven fries.

Max choked it all down, and wrote, **Thank you sir.** He knew Nick could smell his distress, and he could smell Nick's own rising concern.

Maybe, Max thought, he thinks it's kind to say, even though it's so obviously untrue. Maybe Nick was trying to be nice, here. Max got the sense that Nick was trying, in general. Most of the time. Nick might be lying, but it was meant as a gesture.

He remembered the last conversation they'd had like this. Last night, when Nick had asked to put his arm around Max, and Max had frozen up. Now, somewhat impulsively, Max shifted closer to Nick, until their legs were touching. He leaned into him, and when Nick put an arm around him, it felt like tearing the scab off an itching wound: satisfying, a relief. Stinging with pain. A sticky, gross welling-up.

When he turned his face into Nick's neck, and let Nick hitch him a little closer, scenting Nick's similar relief, he was able to pinpoint the feeling: shame. It was transactional, a gesture for a gesture, but that wasn't all it was. He could feel his heart rate slowing. Could feel Nick's breath ruffling his hair. Nick, who would tell Max he mattered after a day spent demonstrating the opposite. Hating the part of himself that wanted the comfort and the contact anyways was a familiar groove for Max's thoughts.

While the others got ready for bed, Max started wondering how long this was going to last until Nick thought it was good enough. On one level, Max was melting into the prolonged contact, and on another, he was enduring it. Rationally, Max knew that he should want Nick to think that this meant the door was open to more, open to actually using Max like an omega. He knew it would improve his position in the pack, for Nick to be fucking him. But the reality was that Max was hyperaware of where each of Nick's hands were–one on Max's shoulder, one resting loosely on the notebook in Nick's own lap–and he would have cringed, if they'd moved.

Eventually, Max shifted his weight, and Nick squeezed his shoulder, and they disentangled. Mortifyingly, the others had been watching them on and off, and Isaac was actually teary-eyed. When Max was finished washing up for the night, Isaac waved him over. In the pack notebook, he wrote, **Hey sweetheart, I'm sorry about today. We sent those shitheads back to kindergarten where they belong, don't even worry about them. Tomorrow will be better, okay?**

Max didn't believe him. He felt on some level like maybe he should, like maybe his disbelief was disloyal, or irrational. But then Isaac settled Max in as his little spoon, between him and Nick yet again, and the pack didn't set a watch the way they'd done on the road. Max couldn't even cry about it, had to maintain his composure even now, in the moments he had with his thoughts before sleep. He held himself still, and didn't ball up against his roiling stomach. It required discipline to prevent: he could feel it like an ache, the way his back wanted to curl and his arms wanted to wrap around himself, and he knew he was being rigid in Isaac's arms instead of soft. He thought that it would have been easier to feel the grinding hollowness, instead of this twisting pain. Max almost missed the hunger, in comparison to this stark version of a meal.

The next day, Kelly was waiting for Max and Johnny in the kitchen, though he looked half asleep. He gave Johnny and Max a lazy salute, and took down a large sack of flour when Johnny directed him. They chopped and fried some sausages from the freezer and made pancakes, which Johnny treated as a vehicle for a variety of nuts and seeds. Max was on pancake-flipping duty, which he knew was another case of being given the easy work, but this morning he didn't mind. It was warm by the stove, and he could have half his mind on the task, and the rest of his attention on watching Johnny and Kelly interact.

Maybe it was because they were all more or less the same age, or maybe it was because Kelly was a beta and not an alpha, but he didn't seem to have a problem taking direction from

Johnny. His body language was as laid back as it had been yesterday, smiling and chatting, whereas Johnny was still hesitant and cautious with a near-stranger.

Pete wandered in at one point to talk to Johnny, and Kelly straightened up, firming his posture and bowing his head like he was concentrating on the dishes. He caught Max watching him, and gave him a wink and a little smile, like he and Max were in on something together. Max felt such a surge of gratitude for it that he had to look away, back down to the pancakes.

Max had oatmeal in hot water again, while the others ate. Johnny wrote to Max that Kelly was going to show him the warehouse, and they could start resupplying the RV while Johnny cleaned up after breakfast. Unlike yesterday, Max's moment of wanting Johnny not to send him off like this was fleeting, and he successfully swallowed it down, obediently following Kelly down the hall.

It helped that Kelly felt a little less like a threat. Max watched the back of his head, as they went up one, two, three flights of stairs. Kelly's ease was contagious. Not much, but enough that Max's pulse wasn't racing when Kelly tipped his head, to indicate for Max to precede him into a little room off the third floor hallway.

He could recognize it as a conference room. Max did a little loop around the table in the middle, counting the eight chairs, noting the whiteboard, the projector, the layer of dust. He was momentarily distracted from wondering why Kelly had brought him here, as it occurred to him that he didn't really know what the men who would have worked here before the collapse actually did, how this room would have been used. He had never had firsthand insight into how the alphas and betas who left their packs for work and school actually spent their time. That made a place like this room feel slightly unreal, almost like a movie set. It was similar to the way so many places these last few years, since the hospital, had borne a sheen of unreality.

Kelly was grinning, excited, and he closed the door behind him. Max wondered if he was supposed to be afraid now, but after the previous iteration of this had ended in oven fries, he couldn't muster the terror. Kelly was pointing to the wall, gesturing, and he pulled a pancake out of a pocket and held it out to Max.

This time, Max trusted him enough to take it from his hand, still making sure to avoid the touch of Kelly's skin on his. He inhaled the pancake in a few quick bites, and only in the moment after it was gone did he worry that maybe this would have the same debilitating effect on his stomach as the oven fries. Kelly was still pointing to the whiteboard on the wall, and saying something, but Max could only stare at him blankly. "Thanks for the pancake," he said.

Kelly grabbed a red marker from a little tray at the bottom of the whiteboard, and wrote in an untidy hand: **We can talk to each other with this and then erase it!**

Max took two steps forward, and ran the pad of his pointer finger down the exclamation mark. It erased, and suddenly it clicked for him how valuable this was. Not only could they talk, but they could have the privacy of ephemeral speech, instead of the inked record of the notebooks, available for anyone to read.

He picked up a blue marker and started with, **My name is Max.**

I'm Kelly! Nice to meet you! Kelly drew a little smiley face, and then he used the heel of his hand to erase everything he'd written so far. His expression growing more serious, he said, **Dude you have got to get better at stealing food or you're going to die. You look like shit sorry not sorry. You can't let them cut your rations so much for so long.**

Max chewed his lip. Was it a bad idea to confess how little time he'd spent with his new pack? It might make him seem more vulnerable, like his pack's claim on him was weaker. But he was touched by Kelly's concern, and a little enamored by the chance to speak so freely, so he went for it. **They don't starve me. I only joined their pack recently, and they're trying to help me. One of them, Pete, is a doctor, and he says that if I eat too much too soon I'll get sick.** He copied Kelly, erasing with the heel of his hand.

Kelly squinted for a moment, and then erased his previous text to instead write: **You sure that's legit?**

That rocked Max back on his heels, as he thought about it. He honestly hadn't considered that Pete's medical advice might not be sound, might be a manipulation.

Kelly winced at whatever he saw on Max's face, and erased his question. **Don't worry about it man. They said they'll let you eat like normal in the future?**

Max nodded.

Kelly: **Good! It's like fucked up to not feed you. You didn't do anything where this is the punishment?**

Max shook his head. **They're already giving me more now than a week ago. It's getting better.**

They each erased their text, and then they stood there for a moment. Max wondered if they were each waiting for the other to speak first. Max broke the ice: **How long have you been with this pack?**

Kelly answered, **Not quite a year. They took me + my dam + my little brother pretty early, when they first moved on this area. I'm from here originally, Northeast KC. We lived off of Independence Ave before. You?**

He could have been asking how long Max had been with his pack, but Max decided to duck it. He was more interested in untangling what Kelly meant. **I'm not from here. What happened?**

They erased the board again–there was going to be a stain on the heel of Max's hand.

They came in on a train, a few dozen men. Nobody had seen a train run for like two years, we were all pretty surprised. My neighborhood was just south of the railyard so they got us first. My sire and most of my original pack were already long gone, we lost

them with the sickness. But we were doing pretty well for ourselves. We had a network. Didn't have enough ammo though.

The matter-of-factness struck a chord with Max, and he nodded. While Kelly erased, he wrote, **I only made it a couple weeks out from the hospital the first time. I'm from St Louis. I moved around a lot, with different packs, there was a lot of fighting. Eventually I got away and was by myself for a really long time, before my current pack. I haven't been with them for long.**

He watched Kelly's face as he read Max's words, and it occurred to him that the existence of a local network of survivors tracked with the level of organization this warehouse seemed to have so recently lost. He turned it over in his mind, trying to figure out what the right thing to ask would be, that would unravel the knot. He started with, **Where did they come from, the men on the train?**

St. Louis before here, so I guess you missed them, but Chicago before that. They're a splinter group, they call what they're doing to KC 'consolidation.' They talk all kinds of shit about what went down in Chicago, I don't know how much of it is real. The head alpha is one bitter SOB. Kelly paused, and then erased the last line, before changing the subject. **Do you like them? Your pack.**

Max could feel the potential, like a current traveling down his arm and into the marker in his hand. He wanted this. Needed someone to talk to, about the pack and the whole messy balance of everything he wanted and feared and didn't understand. But this couldn't be that, and he knew it. There were bodies in the dumpster. Kelly had helped put them there. Max didn't want to be next. There were limits here, and as badly as he wanted an outlet, a sounding board, he knew that talking to an outsider about his pack was over the line. Kelly couldn't be trusted that far.

He wrote, **Yeah, mostly. They're nice to me. Do you like yours?**

Kelly laughed, and wrote, **Fuck no, man! I'd leave if there was anywhere to go. Yours isn't part of a larger pack, are they?** He started erasing from the top, as soon as he'd finished writing.

This could be a dangerous question, but Kelly already seemed to know, so Max answered. **No, but they're military, and the military survivors kind of all act like a pack.** He hoped Kelly considered that to mean that Max's pack had backup if anything happened, which wasn't really true.

He watched Kelly erase, **if there was anywhere to go.** He wondered, and then wrote, **Isn't there?**

Kelly understood it as a challenge, Max could tell from the way his expression set. Kelly said, **Most people know what the right answer is, when it's join or die.**

As far as Max could tell, that wasn't answering the question. But he got the sense that this was more fraught territory than he'd expected, and so he backtracked. **How big is the larger pack? If your group here isn't everybody. Is it mostly locals or mostly the newcomers?**

Kelly shrugged. **Couple hundred total. Such a shitshow honestly. They send us out in smaller groups for jobs like this because they're all about to kill each other.**

Max nodded, because he'd seen that before. Packs usually operated at smaller scales for good reasons. He contributed, **Gross**.

Kelly smirked a little and replied, **Very. The big boss is trying to keep his lieutenants from ripping out each other's throats long enough for his grand Chicago revenge. When they take locals they split us up. Impossible to do anything. I don't know any of the guys here from before consolidation, even the others who are from KC.**

That was especially interesting, because it implied that Kelly had things he wanted to do. While they erased, Max tried to think of a way to ask about it. He went with, **Are there a lot of people who don't care about grand Chicago revenge?**

Kelly replied, **It's so stupid that I keep getting caught thinking everybody else must think it's stupid too. You gotta watch your mouth. Well I guess not you! You're going to be fine, you can't even get yourself in trouble.**

Oh, that sucked. That was bad. Was Kelly implying that Max was going to end up with this warlord from Chicago? That's how Max was taking it, at least. He was torn between trying to call Kelly on it, and acting like he hadn't noticed. After hesitating through erasing the board again, he came up with, **When you're not out on jobs do you get to see your dam and brother?**

My dam yes my brother no, Kelly answered. **He's been assigned to a different pack and we're basically never back at base at the same time. But all the omegas stay at base.** Kelly hesitated, eyeing Max a little bit, before he continued: **This pack here, assigned to the warehouse, we don't have any omegas back at base. Weren't assigned any. Which basically guarantees that we'd get to keep ones we bring in.**

Max needed to use this, somehow, instead of just being numbly afraid. He could push Kelly into telling him more, could get something that would be—what, proof? Kelly was already erasing the words on the board.

This was exhausting. Max didn't want to do this after all, didn't want to burden of watching his words and trying his best to manipulate other people into doing him less harm. He must have been letting it show on his face, because Kelly wrote, **Come on, let's start working the list. We can come back here.**

Yes, the list, assembled largely by Johnny of the supplies they needed to pack into the RV. They apparently had their host's blessing to take anything they wanted, which was another goddamn red flag to apparently nobody but Max. What kind of pack just threw their doors open, and made their things on offer to a stranger?

Well. Maybe this was the problem, Max reflected, as they erased the board one last time. Maybe the exact qualities that had made approaching his new pack a tolerable risk also made their judgement poor.

If the conversation had been exhausting, it had nothing on loading the RV. They broke to help Johnny in the kitchen and then eat lunch, and then it was back to combing through the multiple warehouses, going through boxes and searching for things on the list. At least, Max reflected, it wasn't boring. They hauled flats of canned goods, made piles of winter gear, and stumbled upon many boxes of items Max supposed had been less bizarre, before the world changed. Spatulas in the shape of emojis. Neon-colored booties for dogs. Fake plastic potted plants, in fake plastic stone pots.

It was like a scavenger hunt, and Max was even worn out enough to fall into sleep in between his pack leaders without his usual burst of insomniac anxiety. He was sore in the morning, but in a good way, and looking forward to doing it again.

The next three days passed in much the same way—Kelly and Max explored the interconnected warehouses and gathered supplies in between helping Johnny, and they sometimes snuck away to the room with the whiteboard to talk. Somewhat stilted conversations, as they both circled around whatever was really happening between their two packs, but Max loved it, sometimes especially when they were mundane. Kelly thought Johnny's cooking was the best he'd had since the pandemic. He'd grown up with the sounds of the railyard putting him to sleep, and he'd never really rested easy since the trains stopped running. He missed his dam and brother terribly, and he clearly pitied Max for having no living relatives from his pack of origin. Max didn't want to say that he was glad the people who'd first sold him were gone, so he kept it to himself.

He did find it in himself to share some things, vague and nonspecific. He told Kelly that he'd killed people before, though he hadn't explained who or how. He told him how afraid he was of things not working out with his new pack, that he didn't think he had it in him to start over again. He increasingly wanted his new pack to like him, and he struggled to explain how this was a bad thing, but Kelly knew what he meant.

Kelly: **It's easier if you're playing things from your own self interest, and not getting attached.**

Max, relieved: **Yes, exactly. But now I'm fucked, right, if I actually care what they think.**

Kelly, smirking at him: **Poor thing, falling for the basic premise of "being a pack."**

Kelly was very ready to shit talk the various members of his pack, but he didn't force the issue when Max wouldn't reciprocate. He never pulled rank as a beta with Max or with Johnny, and at first Max was chalking it up to Nick's prohibition. He puzzled it out after observing a conflict between Roger and Kelly, in the hallway outside the kitchen, that ended with Kelly on the ground: in a pack that didn't have any omegas, the youngest beta was the one being pushed around by the others, even if they didn't use him like they would an omega. He'd identified Max as a fellow lowest rung on the ladder, and decided for both of them that they would be friends, mixed status or not.

Max was on tenterhooks to leave this place, but he realized that he would miss Kelly and his red dry erase marker, when he left. Kelly didn't treat him like he was precious and breakable, would let him lift whatever Max wanted to struggle to carry. It was easier to give up and signal when he needed help, because Max didn't feel the weight of proving himself around Kelly. It didn't feel like life or death to remember his every expressed preference, or to avoid contradicting him.

The only real moment of tension between them came towards the end of the fourth day, when Max in his wanderings found a locked door in the same area of the building complex as the room with the whiteboard. By now, he'd also put together a shitty DIY lockpicking set, and he'd used it several times with Kelly to explore other areas of the complex. He'd left Kelly to erase the board from their latest conversation, and meandered down the hall, trying doors and peeking inside to see if they contained anything worth taking. He felt himself drawn to this door in particular, because he could feel a change in the air around it. It was subtle, but upon closer inspection, a cold breeze was coming from the crack under the door, like a window was open. It was quick work to pick the lock—all these warehouse office locks worked the same way—and get inside.

The door had to be pushed a little bit, against the slight pressure of inflowing air, but Max got it open. The late afternoon winter made him shiver, and the culprit was immediately obvious. The window on the far wall wasn't just open, it was gone, smashed outwards and left jagged and gaping.

He wondered what had caused it, as he wove between desks and to an overturned conference table at the back of the room. When he arrived at the window, he didn't have to wonder anymore. An enormous black stain covered the carpet below the window, and now that he was looking for it, he spotted the pockmarks of bullets in the floor and walls around the window.

People had been driven to the back of this room, maybe thinking they could hide behind the flipped over table. They'd been shot, so many times that the bullets had knocked out the windows behind them. They had bled out here, such that the carpet in this entire area of the room was now black with their blood. It was frozen, even, in the winter chill from the open window, which was likely why Max hadn't been able to smell it from outside the room.

He was shaking, and he couldn't blame the cold. He'd seen similar and worse in his time on the road, had done plenty of violence himself, but this felt different. He couldn't just pick up and leave this place behind. He had to keep living in this slaughterhouse for however long his pack deemed fit.

When Kelly found him standing there, moments later, Max went with him when he waved for them to leave the room. He tried to go back to the room with the whiteboard, to ask Kelly about what had clearly happened now that he'd seen the evidence for himself. But Kelly wouldn't follow him, and Max stood at the whiteboard for minutes on end, shivering, staring at the blank white expanse with the blue dry erase marker in his hand, trying to come up with what he could possibly say.

Max went back to the kitchen to find Johnny, but Johnny wasn't there. He went back to the room the pack had claimed for a den, but nobody was there either. He guessed Kelly would be in one of the warehouses, going through more boxes and avoiding him, and he knew that the rest of both packs would be at work in the auto bay, because they were always working in the auto bay. He'd grown comfortable moving around the complex by himself or more often with Kelly or Johnny, but he knew he needed permission to go outside by himself. Maybe not to the RV, though. That was outside, but barely. And it was his pack's territory, Kelly wouldn't even go inside it when they brought supplies, so surely it couldn't be considered out of bounds.

Max made for the RV, still parked where they'd left it upon arrival. His breathing was tight and high in his chest, and he had to stop himself from sticking his hand into his messenger bag, to reassure himself that the gun was still there. He knew it was still there, he'd gotten used to the new weight of the bag over his shoulder.

His intuition slowed him down, a minute before his senses caught up with him. He hesitated by the door to the RV, listening, scenting the air. There was the kind of rhythmic whimpering he recognized as Johnny, from the time he'd seen Wes fuck Johnny back when he was spying on them. He could tell by scent it was Logan this time, and guessed they were in the back of the RV, in the bed.

Hesitating with his fingers hovering over the door handle, Max let them drop after another moment of consideration. There wasn't a move available to him, here. He couldn't go in there and peel Logan off a pack omega he had every right to be fucking. He couldn't interrupt them with the latest bloom of his crisis about their hosts, not after Nick had made it so clear he believed whatever story their hosts had fed him. Max didn't have the right to bother one of his pack alphas in the middle of anything, for any reason. Never mind the insanity of drawing the attention of an alpha who was already focused on a different omega.

Standing outside the RV waiting for them to be done made his skin crawl. It was more than that, it made him pace, and he couldn't be out here with his agitation rising in the air like this. It was disrespectful at best. He turned back inside, and found himself going back to the kitchen.

There wasn't really anything to do. The RV was as crammed full of supplies as Max, Johnny, and Kelly could reasonably get it, and the kitchen had been returned to a state of order. Max lapped the kitchen, feeling more of this useless anger bubbling up in his chest. This sense of urgency that had powered him through danger for years, now sending him in circles. He wanted to–he didn't know what he wanted.

That wasn't true. He knew what he wanted, now that he'd had a few tastes of it again, after such a long time: he wanted to talk to somebody.

He flinched, when a *crack* came from the doorway to the kitchen. It was Roger, the beta from the other pack. He'd clapped his hands to get Max's attention.

Hey. What's wrong with you?

Max stared at him from across the room. Did he want food? They'd do dinner in a little while. He watched, wary, as Roger stepped into the kitchen.

Look at you, all worked up. You need somebody to settle you? Roger was taking a softer tone with him now, than the general snapping he'd done at Johnny, and Max didn't like it. He also didn't like that Roger was coming across the room towards him, taking slow, careful steps like he was trying not to startle a spooked horse. His hands were shoved into the pockets of his jeans, his thumbs hooked through his own belt loops, and he kept talking in that soft voice as he approached.

You know something, I can't believe he lets you run around with your neck bare like that. Some alphas, like it's something you have to earn, right? Such bullshit. Imagine having three *omegas and not even bothering to claim all of them.*

Max started backing up a little, moving around one of the long kitchen islands to put it between them. He tried to play it off like he was going to the stack of flatbreads Johnny had prepped, to offer one across the island. But Roger didn't go for it, and rounded the end of the island after him. Still walking slow, hands in his pockets, easy talking like this wasn't anything.

Poor dumb little bitch. I could really say anything to you, couldn't I? That could be nice, you know. An omega who can't whine all day and night. The omega in my last pack was unbelievable, made me wish he'd caught the virus.

Max put the flatbread back. He had three choices, from here. He could go towards the door and try to leave the kitchen, he could go towards the pantry room, or he could do another lap of the room. Getting cornered in the pantry was the worst option, but if he went for the door it would be really obvious he was trying to get away, and Roger might escalate. He opted to keep drifting, past the door and back around the perimeter of the kitchen.

You're easier on the eyes than those other two, I'll give you that. Pretty, and quiet, but you reek of anxiety. We could fix that, I bet. You need somebody's hands on you, don't you? I bet you'd be good for me.

Max, for once, didn't care that he was missing what somebody was saying. He just wanted Roger to leave.

Are you a crier, sweet thing? I know that brat is a crier, I can tell by looking at him. But you, I'm not sure. We'll have to test you out, won't we? Are you gonna cry for me, when I've got you all stretched out on my cock?

This was so stupid. For a second, Max's irritation almost overpowered his fear. He'd done almost a full circle of the room again, in a low-pursuit chase with this idiot whose most distinguishing feature was the ridiculous tan lines on his forehead from wearing a backwards baseball cap. Max picked up a flatbread again, and gestured with it. "If you're not here for anything to eat, you can leave," he said, pointing to the flatbread, and to the door. The words would be unintelligible, but at least his voice didn't shake, and he hoped the meaning got across.

Roger grinned at him, and Max forced something like a smile back, and repeated the gesture pointing to the flatbread and the door. Then Roger moved, a few short strides to close the distance, and Max backpedaled rapidly.

Woah there, you sure are a skittish creature. For the best, I suppose, for a young, pretty omega. Have you ever been fucked before? Anybody taught you how to take it?

Roger had cut him off from the door, and was herding him into the walk-in pantry. Max gripped the flatbread in both hands, holding it between them to make space. “Please don’t,” he said, and he could smell his own fear rising. This was so much worse than when Kelly had first gotten him alone, Max could tell the difference in the look on Roger’s face. He was leaning against the doorway to the pantry now, hands still in his pockets, blocking the way out. “My alpha’s not okay with it. He’d get you in trouble, with your alpha.”

Poor little babbling babel. We’re going to have fun, I can tell. I don’t mind ‘em stupid, I can come up with better things for your mouth to be doing, anyways.

Max could smell it, then. In the open air of the enormous kitchen it hadn’t been evident, but in the close space of the pantry annex, he could pick it out: the slow rise of the other man’s arousal, ending any doubt that this was anything other than what Max feared it was. As he pressed himself against the shelf at the back of the pantry, he shot a glance down to check, but nothing was especially visible through Roger’s jeans.

Oh yeah, I knew you were interested. Roger pulled his hands from his pockets, and started unbuckling his belt. *I caught that look, you little slut, don’t think I didn’t. You want to get a better view?*

“Don’t,” Max said again, and damn, his voice was shaking again. It was useless to argue in words that didn’t mean anything, but somehow he kept speaking anyways. “My alpha doesn’t share me. You’re not allowed to be doing this.”

There was no air in the room, in this tiny pantry. He was still holding the flatbread out between them like some kind of shield, as Roger took himself out of his pants and began palming his hardening length.

You know what to do with one of these, don’t play the blushing virgin with me. Get a good look, and dream of me tonight. Skinny little whore, I bet I can make you scream for it. Your bitch alpha doesn’t give it to you half as good as I will, that’s for damn sure.

Max didn’t know if watching or not watching was the better move here. He kept his eyes on Roger’s chest, not turning away completely but trying not to look down. Roger didn’t advance past the doorway, just kept up his stream of chatter, talking at Max while he touched himself. Max braced himself for it to escalate, his mind a screaming blank as for what to do.

It was hard to say how long it lasted. Minutes that felt like years, an interminability it had in common with every other sweat-soaked, fear-steeped sexual encounter of Max’s life. And then Roger was buckling his belt, and turning around, and leaving the kitchen entirely.

He hadn't finished. Hadn't even touched Max, hadn't come within arm's reach of him. Max was still holding the fucking flatbread in both hands, more than a little crushed from his grip. Swaying on his feet a little, static in his ears, Max looked at the crumbling bits falling to the floor, and started laughing at the absurdity of it. He had a fucking gun in his bag, and when cornered he'd tried to defend himself with–what was this, a pita?

He had to eat it now, and hope Johnny didn't miss it from the stack. It couldn't be returned to the pile in its mangled state, and the idea of putting it in the garbage was significantly more repulsive than the idea of eating the pieces off the floor. For once, Max wasn't the least bit hungry, his mouth almost too dry to swallow, but he was determined. He forced it down, and then knelt to get the fallen pieces.

For a moment it was like he could see himself from the outside. An omega crouched on the ground, eating off the floor. Prey animal, who'd frozen. The self-loathing hit him like a punch, crowding into the empty space he'd become when Roger…when Roger…

When Roger nothing, he decided. It didn't have to be anything. What had really happened, in the end? He hadn't laid a hand, or anything else, on Max. There weren't any marks, would be nothing to scent. His pack wouldn't catch that Max had been…

Prey animal, his mind helpfully suggested again, but that wasn't it at all. He was the pack's property, and he hadn't competently defended himself. Roger was a beta, and Max an omega. Max would be the liar, if it came out. It was fundamentally Max's fault, and whatever happened next would be his fault, too. Conflict between the packs, or punishment from Nick for the indiscretion, or…

Max didn't know. He kept running out of road with his thoughts, unable to finish them. But it didn't matter, because the pack wouldn't find out. It could be like it never happened.

He needed to sleep. Dinner would be relatively soon, but suddenly Max just couldn't keep his eyes open. He pulled himself into the little nest in the pantry shelf where he'd napped before, and was out almost immediately.

It felt less like sleep, and more like blinking. When he opened his eyes, disoriented, it was to Johnny, Isaac, and Pete, crowding the pantry around his nest. They wore similar expressions of concern, and Max cringed and dropped his gaze as he sat up. His immediate, irrational fear was that they could somehow see it on him.

Hey baby boy, are you feeling all right? Isaac crouched down to Max's level, and made a writing motion with his hand. When Max fumbled the pack notebook and a pen over to him, he wrote, **Johnny couldn't wake you up. How are you feeling? Can Pete take vitals?**

Max gave them a thumbs up, and nodded to Pete. He held still while Pete pressed fingers to his jugular, and tried to breathe normally. Being careful not to let any of them see the gun, he pulled his own notebook out and told them, **I'm fine, I was just taking a nap. I'm sorry.**

His pulse is fine, Pete said. *What I would do for an actual EKG…can you ask him if he's experiencing any blurred vision, lightheadedness, or nausea? Chest pain, palpitations?*

Max felt increasingly embarrassed as they ran through the checkup. He was fine, he assured them, he'd just apparently slept harder than he usually did, for whatever reason. Isaac didn't need to be fussing over him this much. This wasn't the thing Pete was always worried he was going to come down with–refeeding syndrome.

I want to get a field EKG machine, as soon as this job is over, Pete was saying, as they finally wrapped it up. *It's actually ridiculous that we don't already have one, now that I'm thinking about it.*

Kelly was hovering in the doorway, peering over their shoulders. *Is he okay?*

Seems like it, Johnny told him. *Maybe he overdid it earlier, and was just tired.*

They wouldn't let Max carry anything, on the way to setting up dinner in the auto bay. He didn't have the energy to be as annoyed by it as he probably should have been, and he rebuffed Johnny's attempt to initiate a written conversation once they'd all sat down.

Hey, I've been meaning to ask, Kelly said, *why are there two notebooks, like you guys all write in one, and he writes in another? Wouldn't it be quicker and easier to pass one back and forth?*

We started with passing one notebook, Johnny said, *but when it was our turn, and we took it to say something, he would get stressed out. So we got another one, and this way we never have to take the one that's his.*

The packs ate dinner as a large group, as they usually did, and Max forced down his broth and half a flatbread while avoiding looking at anybody. When his pack retreated to the space they'd made their den, Max found himself frozen again over changing into the looser clothes he wore as pajamas. He'd changed in front of the others many times by now, and they in front of him, but now his hands went stiff on the hem of his shirt.

He forced himself through it, but the resulting anxiety in his scent was evident to the whole pack. Isaac got up and beelined for him, making the soft incredulous noises he often did when talking to Max, but Max sidestepped his outstretched arm. It couldn't be that, not right now. He went right to the bed, where Nick was already laying down.

He put himself in Nick's arms, and he could smell the little zing of surprise in Nick's scent as he nuzzled close.

Hello to you too, Nick rumbled, and Max could tell he was pleased even if he hadn't been expecting this. Good.

Keenly aware of the rest of the pack watching them, Max tilted his face up, and kissed the underside of Nick's jaw. He felt the stubble against his lips, and turned slightly so that his next kiss was to the place where Nick's jaw met his neck, and his third kiss was to the soft place above Nick's pulse point.

Hey. What's going on, Max? Nick's low voice was gentle, but Max could hear the incredulity.

He would have to pull away to look Nick in the face, so he didn't. He pressed himself closer so his chest was flush with his alpha's. He wrapped his arms around Nick and held on, tightly. He intertwined their legs, and arced his hips forward to grind lightly against Nick's groin. He turned his face to the side, burying it in Nick's arm, exposing the length of his neck. He waited, trembling just slightly.

Logan's voice: *Is he…he's not going into heat?*

Isaac: *No, we'd be able to smell it. I'm not sure what this is.*

Max would beg out loud, if it would have done any good. He waited, the horror of this abject vulnerability held at a distance by the static inside his head.

Nick leaned in and scent-marked him, running his cheek and jaw over Max's exposed neck. When he reached up, cradling Max to hold him with one firm hand on the back of his neck, Max almost cried. He slid into loose-bodied submission. He tried to grind against Nick again, to solicit more, and Nick just hitched him close enough to prohibit it and held him tight.

I got you. Shh, it's all right, I got you. I don't need any of that, okay? You're mine, just the same.

Max didn't know what he was saying, but it was clear Nick was speaking *to* Max. Not at him, or about him, or over him. The hand kneading the back of his neck was playing the strings of a bone deep biological instrument, and suddenly Max found himself wanting to cry, reaching for it. He could feel a tension in his throat and around his eyes, but he just couldn't let go.

Once again, Max didn't sleep at all. It wasn't sleep, but it wasn't the hair-raising vigilance of keeping watch, either. He floated in Nick's arms, the alpha's scent and touch enough to numb him. He knew his misery was keeping the others up, too. Somebody on the other side of the nest snored on and off, and sometimes at his back he could hear Isaac's breathing drop deep and even. But Nick never slept. Just lay there entwined with Max, sometimes petting him, sometimes still and solid.

Max waited for one of the others to get up first, before he pulled away. He knew his scent was muddled with misery, that they could all tell. He was being conspicuous, unpleasant. Once again, he got stuck at the point of changing out of his sleep clothes, and this time he couldn't make himself strip and redress. He pulled his day clothes on over top, keeping the layer that smelled the most of Nick.

Johnny and Isaac both tried to talk to him, as the pack roused for the day. Max had lost track of when they were supposed to be leaving, but it looked like the others were packing up. Max didn't have anything besides what he was wearing and the contents of his messenger bag, and he tried to blend into the wall while the other omegas were less and less discrete with their overtures.

This is what you do, right? Johnny addressed Isaac, while Max stared at the floor as if he couldn't see Johnny's hands. *The hand gesture, for when you want him to give you the pack*

notebook?

Yeah, he knows, Isaac replied. *Hey, sweetheart? Can I please…*

Isaac reached for the bag, and Max flinched, wringing the strap in his hands. He wasn't sure he'd ever refused any of them anything, before, and the fear was closing his throat. But he couldn't give Isaac the bag, it would risk the others finding the stolen protein bars and gun. And he also couldn't fish out the pack notebook, because then they would be having an actual conversation, which might be worse than getting caught with a weapon.

Oh, honey. It's okay, Isaac said, backing off. He put his empty palms up in what after a second was clearly a surrender, and Max couldn't stop himself from cringing at first, pressing back to brace against the wall.

Stop crowding him, said Pete.

He hasn't been this scared of us before, Johnny said.

Wes cut in. *Dude, he has totally been this scared of us. This is still better than he was the first couple of days.*

I mean of us. Johnny was gesturing between himself and Isaac. *And he hasn't stopped any of us from talking to him before.*

Nick or I could try asking for the notebook? Logan said.

No, said Johnny and Isaac at the same time. Max ground his teeth. Were they arguing about him? He just needed to get out of this room, and on with the day. He could get his scent back to a neutral baseline if he just had something to do, enough work that he could ignore everything else.

He's an omega who was running around solo in the apocalypse, the kid has PTSD, said Pete. *It's just a bad day–night, whatever. Every one of you hates it when the rest of us get precious while you're having a moment.*

I don't know what this is, but it doesn't feel like something we can just leave as is, Isaac said.

Something triggered him, and he came to his alpha to regulate, Nick put in. *That's a good thing, that's him acting like a pack member, instead of white-knuckling a stress response by himself. We don't need to talk to him, if he doesn't want to talk. It goes against my instincts too, but I don't think we should push him any harder, right now.*

Nick's words broke up the standoff, and the pack left the den, hauling the supplies they'd gradually sprawled across the space over the last few days. Max felt a lift in his chest, at that: they might really be leaving. He wouldn't have to stay here much longer, wouldn't have to see Roger all the time. It would go back to being like it was before, on the road, with simple routines he could understand and contribute to.

Breakfast was only eventful insofar as Max got to have butter on his toast for the first time. He hadn't had butter in years, and it was almost enough to unspool the tension from his

shoulders. Johnny let him have an extra slathered slice when they got back to the kitchen, away from Pete's disapproval.

Kelly caught up to them outside the kitchen, and there was something in his scent. In his eyes, too, a look Max couldn't entirely place or interpret. Kelly licked his lips, shifted his weight, and hiked up his shirt. There was a flat rectangular object, wrapped in brown paper and tucked into his waistband.

Is that a book? Johnny asked, peering over Max's shoulder as Kelly pulled the object loose, and pushed it at Max.

Hush, Kelly said. *Don't say anything, okay? Hey, Max–just put it in your bag. Can you just–look at it later, okay?*

Max took it, and started unwrapping it, but Kelly shook his head, and pointed to the messenger bag. *Later,* Kelly said. *Look at it later, just stow it now.*

Did you steal it? Johnny asked, voice dipping low. *What is it?*

Max knew that tone. He shoved the item in the bag, and observed as Kelly looked up and down the hallway, making sure nobody else was watching.

Doesn't matter. Look, I'll come find y'all later, how's that? Just sit tight. Kelly waved them into the kitchen, and Max and Johnny went, exchanging a slightly bewildered glance. At least whatever this was, Johnny didn't look like he understood any better than Max, for being able to converse aloud.

He was tempted to look at the mystery package immediately, but he was also spooked by the handoff. Kelly had acted like somebody was going to come along at any moment, and Max would bet that was because it was a real risk. Without discussing it in writing, Johnny and Max agreed to clean up after breakfast first, before looking at the package.

They were washing dishes, water going full blast, and so Johnny missed it when the lock on the outside of the kitchen door clicked closed. Max straightened immediately, and went to the door with sudsy hands, the messenger bag bumping against the back of his thigh.

What are you… Johnny trailed off, watching Max try the locked door. His voice took on sour annoyance. *Goddamn it, again?*

Johnny wasn't as afraid as he'd been the first time this happened. Max, on the other hand, was terrified. This felt fundamentally different, and he paced the length of the room, trying the door again.

Hey, hey, we'll talk to Nick as soon as lunchtime rolls around. Johnny was saying something to Max, his tone pacifying, but Max shook him off. This was so much worse than the first time, because presumably if his pack was about to leave, the other pack had gotten what they wanted already. Max's pack had so much less leverage, and their hosts were responding to that changed positioning by crossing a clearly defined boundary.

Well, fuck that. Max felt the adrenaline as a tautness over his skin. He dried his hands, gritted his teeth, and crouched by the door, pulling his improvised lockpicks. He could hear and smell the members of their host pack, coming and going outside the door, but that wasn't enough to deter him. They had to get out of this room, right fucking now.

Holy shit, Johnny murmured, as he drifted up behind him, observing. *Max? Hey, Max?* He was making the writing gesture again, but they did not have time for that, so Max continued to ignore it.

All the locks in this building were basically the same. Max had it open in less than a minute, but he waited until Kelly's smell was the strongest in the hallway beyond, before he opened the door.

Kelly was actually still in the hallway, and from the surprise on his face Max understood that Kelly knew Max and Johnny were supposed to be locked in. *Hey,* Kelly said, an uncertain sound. *I don't suppose you're just down to…go back in?*

What's going on? Johnny asked him, coming out into the hallway ahead of Max.

Nothing's going on, Kelly said.

We're not supposed to be locked in, we've been over this, Johnny snapped.

Roger rounded the corner at the other end of the hall, and the glance the two betas exchanged made Max want to run. He didn't know what was happening, but the dread was heavy in his stomach. He and Johnny were pinned down now, both exits blocked. *I was just telling them that I wanted to talk to Max for a minute,* Kelly said to Roger. *Alone.*

I want to talk to my alpha, Johnny said, *right now*. He was holding his ground, but now he was a little shakier, Max could hear it in his voice. Max slowly stepped out of the kitchen, and took ahold of Johnny's sleeve with two fingers. He pulled, and Johnny let himself be towed a step, then two, down the hallway in the direction of Kelly, away from Roger. If they had to figure out how to get past one or the other of them, Max would take his chances with Kelly.

The rest of the pack was most likely ahead of them, past Kelly and closer to the other side of the complex, in the auto bay. That's where they'd left them when breakfast had ended. The RV was behind them down a network of hallways, where Roger was blocking the path. Kelly and Roger were armed and Johnny wasn't. They had to at least try to retreat, and maybe as seemingly-helpless omegas, they'd be allowed to go towards the rest of their pack.

Roger had half a smile on his face, and when he spoke, it was to Kelly. *That's cute. I think I'm going to talk to Max alone, actually. You can have the other one.*

We're going to see Nick, Johnny said firmly, and Max towed him back another couple of steps, holding his breath.

Roger started to advance on them. Max grabbed for Johnny's wrist, ready to bolt and haul his packmate along with him, and he shot a look at Kelly, trying to gauge the situation.

Kelly wouldn't look at him.

Max is coming with me, Kelly snapped at Roger, showing much more spine than Max had seen from him. The others of the host pack–the enemy pack, Max renamed them–had always seemed comfortable pushing Kelly around. *He can come with me, or I can tell Kent to search the blue filing cabinet in the west annex.*

Roger made a face. *You are such a shitting waste of space.* He pulled his handgun halfway out of its holster. *All three of you can go back in the kitchen, as far as I'm concerned.*

What's going on? Johnny exclaimed, his panic finally reaching the heights of Max's own. Max wanted to just run, was willing to gamble Roger wouldn't shoot in Kelly's direction and that they could make it by Kelly, but Johnny stuttered to a stop and put his hands up.

I told you we should have separated them, Roger was grousing to Kelly. *Which one of them did the door? I know you know.*

It would have been Max. He comes with me, Kelly insisted. *You think I'm bluffing? I'm not.*

You can't talk to him, he's fucked in the head, Roger snarled. *And you can't threaten me, asshole. You disobey orders now, and I'll make sure when this is done you get what's coming to you. Kent isn't going to believe you over me. He'll use the pipe, and then put you on the chain back at base camp. Is that how you want this to play out?*

The quiet in the hallway was so sharp, Max felt it scrape over his skin. He grabbed for the hem of Johnny's shirt, and tried to urge him to keep inching down the hallway towards Kelly.

Take me to see my alpha right now, Johnny exclaimed, suddenly enough that Max flinched.

Actually, that's a great idea, Roger said. *Kelly, take him to see his alpha, before I lose my fucking patience. I've always thought you had too many teeth, you know.*

Fuck you, Kelly said. Whatever the sentiment, his energy was flagging, and he made a loose gesture that was almost a beckoning wave. *I'll take them both, how's that?*

Roger stormed down the hallway at them, and Max bolted. Kelly blocked him, and didn't give when Max crashed into him. Max threw an elbow, and Kelly shoved him away hard, into Roger.

"Get off," Max exclaimed, hoarse, as Roger grabbed him by the upper arm and yanked.

You'll take the brat, Roger told Kelly.

Don't touch him, Johnny exclaimed, trying to go towards Max, but then he gasped in shock as Kelly grabbed him too.

There wasn't time to reach for one another. To grab each other, and refuse to let go. It happened in a heartbeat, and then they were out of arm's reach. Kelly hauled a stiffly resisting Johnny around the corner, and then they were out of sight.

Max couldn't even look at Roger. They stood like that for what felt like minutes, Roger gripping Max's arm hard enough to hurt, Max not breathing.

Then Roger said, *So you've got some picks on you? Good to know. I've got to search you then, don't I? Scheming little slut. Let's go.*

He started hauling Max in the other direction from where Kelly had taken Johnny, and Max didn't go the way Johnny had, rigid. He fought like a cat, twisting and clawing and kicking, trying to break Roger's grip. His panic spiked when he thought Roger was going to force him back into the kitchen–and then to the pantry again, and then–but they didn't go into the kitchen, they went past it.

For the eternity of about another fifteen seconds, as Roger was dragging Max down the hallway while he fought to get away, Max debated it with himself. The questions, in order, went like this:

Do I want to go wherever he's taking me? The answer was a clear 'no.'

What am I going to do to get out of this? The real answer was, and had been for a long time, 'anything.' In other moments, Max sometimes wished he wasn't this person. But he was, and in this moment he felt something mentally click into place, as he moved to the next question:

The gun or the knife?

If he went for the gun, he would have to get one or both clips on his messenger bag undone, and then open it, and then reach in, and then get the safety off, and then get a good enough angle to get a good enough shot off before Roger stopped him.

If he went for the knife–it was already in his hand as he began the thought, his grip tightening as he shook off the makeshift cloth sheath with a flick of his wrist. He twisted, slashing over the hand gripping his shoulder, and then put his weight into it as he drove it into Roger's eye.

He noted, in a detached sort of way, that the paring knife wasn't long enough for any one blow to kill quickly. Certainly he didn't want to fuck around with getting past Roger's tactical vest, never mind his rib cage. So when he ripped the knife free and Roger tackled him into the wall, howling, Max already had an action plan, which boiled down to, 'get him in the face and neck.'

What happened next came to Max as if in slow motion: impact of his back against the wall, slam of it rattling his teeth. Roger pinning his chest with a shoulder, one hand grabbing ahold of Max's knife arm just below the wrist. The understanding as they grappled that he was about to lose the knife, and he was dead if Roger got it. The beta was just so much stronger, his fingers digging in. With another flick of Max's wrist, he tossed it a few feet away out of immediate reach, and then reared back and headbutted Roger as hard as he could, aiming for the bloody wreck of the left side of his face.

They went to the ground, and Max kicked blindly, reaching. He was on his belly half underneath Roger, and if he'd had an ounce less of adrenaline roaring through his veins he

would have panicked, but he was able to twist enough to see that he'd fallen about three feet shy of the knife. Yeah, he thought, three feet is doable.

He had a leg mostly free, and managed to leverage himself forward another six inches. He threw an elbow back and caught some part of Roger, he wasn't sure where. There was a hand grabbing at his neck and face like Roger was making an attempt to haul him backwards, and Max bit it hard, felt bone give, heard Roger scream even louder than he had before. Max bucked and fought, clawed at the hand with his nails, and got enough room to dive forward for the knife.

He got it, and twisted onto his back, bringing it up into Roger's neck. Max stabbed, and kicked, and managed to shove the beta all the way off.

Breathing hard and fast, Max scrambled to his feet. He hadn't lost his messenger bag, and he fumbled with it, backpedaling down the hallway until he was well out of Roger's reach.

Gunfire sounded from the main warehouse, and Max flinched. He couldn't go that way, after Johnny and Kelly. For a minute he stared down at the dying man on the floor. Roger had his bloody, injured hands up to his bloody, injured neck. Max hadn't exactly been aiming, but the volume of blood accumulated on the floor in just the last few seconds said he'd hit something vital. Roger would not be getting up.

Max only felt relief.

He dropped the knife, and took the gun from the messenger bag. More gunfire from the warehouse, and yelling–Max felt, on the level of instinct, that there was nothing he could do there. He needed to get out of the building, and take cover somewhere.

There was yelling outside, too, and so Max didn't take the main exit they'd used when he'd first arrived. He took the exit he'd used with Kelly to take out the trash, and came out a door partially behind the dumpsters. From here, the RV was close, close enough to risk darting to, but the angle was bad. He'd have to be partially exposed to the main doors, crossing the long side of the dumpster to make it to the back corner of the RV. And what was his plan, anyways? Steal the RV? And go where, in a city controlled by a pack he'd just killed a member of? Without his own pack?

No, he needed to come up with something else. He wasn't going to just run.

Max flinched hard when the main entrance banged open, and a group of people staggered out of the warehouse. He felt a moment of rising hope when he heard Nick's voice, but then it settled back down to dread at the enemy pack's lead alpha's answering snarl.

I'm not going to–

Like hell!

The sound of an impact, and Max risked a glance around the corner of the dumpster. Nick, blood tracking from his mouth over his chin, was standing next to the RV, his empty hands raised. The enemy alpha was pointing a rifle at him, yelling something. Closer to the doors,

another beta of the enemy pack had ahold of Pete, who had been disarmed. Then came Kelly dragging a stumbling Logan through the doors after them, the latter pressing both hands over a heavily bleeding wound to his abdomen. Max could hear more gunfire coming from inside the warehouse, even after the door swung shut behind Kelly, and he knew that meant that the others at least weren't all dead or captured yet.

He told himself that Kelly hadn't killed Johnny, that there was some other explanation for why Kelly was now hauling Logan around instead.

It's a simple ask. In fact, I bet your life has never been this cheap. The enemy alpha was taking a tone with Nick that Max couldn't parse.

It's not possible. Nick was disagreeing with the man holding the gun, that much was obvious. In Max's experience, this meant that they were about to run out of road.

A boom from inside the warehouse rocked the whole building, and Max took advantage of the moment everyone turned towards the entryway to sprint to the far side of the RV. If he went to the front, he would have the engine block for cover, and he would have a good angle on Kelly and the other beta, but not the enemy alpha. Sketching it out in his head, Max unlooped and let go of his messenger bag, too quickly to feel the stabbing fear of losing its contents. He dropped to the ground, and rolled underneath the RV just behind the front wheels, keeping ahold of the gun.

Look, the deal can get sweeter. I'm not strictly supposed to do this, but hey: I'll let you keep one of the omegas, how's that? You can pick one, if you come over. It just takes a little radio call. You just think about which one you want to keep, or if you'd rather watch us cap them all one at a time.

The enemy alpha had to be the priority. Not just because he was the leader, but because when they flipped from this hostage situation back to active fighting, none of Max's pack was close enough to contain the enemy alpha for any length of time. He was willing to bet that Logan and Pete would immediately start grappling with their captors once things turned, but the few feet of distance between Nick and the enemy alpha would start with Nick getting killed and end with the rest of them similarly dead in quick succession.

The gun was warm and a little damp in his sweaty palms. Max shifted, shuffling inch by inch on his back under the RV, wincing at the tiny sounds of his clothing scraping against the asphalt, as he put himself in position.

It had taken about five seconds, for Max to kill his old pack. Three people who hadn't been expecting it in the slightest, who hadn't had any inkling of what he was planning or what he was capable of. Thinking about it later, he'd decided it had worked out for one reason: commitment. When he had his moment, he'd taken it. Once he'd started, there hadn't been any hesitation.

Five seconds. He could do it again, easy. This would all be over in five seconds.

He measured the distance with his eyes. One roll, then shoot. He counted himself down, the length of time it would take, as the enemy alpha started yelling at Nick. Five, four, three,

two–

One. Max held his breath and rolled out from under the RV. He braced his shoulders on the pavement, lying on his back, and brought the gun up, holding it in both hands.

Two. There was an instant of shock, a lack of recognition, on the enemy alpha's face before Max's first two shots blew it off.

Three. He kept squeezing the trigger, firing a third, fourth, fifth, sixth round into the enemy alpha's head and chest.

Four. Then came a shot, not Max's, as the others started to fight again in earnest. Nick tackled the enemy alpha as he fell, and ripped his rifle away. Pete was reeling, blood running down the side of his head, and he leaned far enough away from the beta who'd held him that Nick was able to kill the beta before he got another shot off.

Five. Kelly turned his handgun on Nick, but Logan threw himself to the ground, and Kelly didn't let go. He was pulled off balance as he fired, and the shots went wide of Nick, burying into the RV. Then Nick shot Kelly twice in the head. Close range, no further than Max had been from the enemy alpha.

Kelly dropped like a stone.

It was over.

Pete crouched over Logan, and Nick yelled something to them as he ran back into the building with the enemy alpha's rifle raised.

Max, for lack of a better move, rolled back under the RV. He shimmied his way back across, until he could snag his messenger bag. Still lying on the ground, he pulled it over, and looped it around himself again.

The gun was hot, in his hands.

People were yelling. Mostly Pete was yelling, and then there were footsteps over him, inside the RV. Max stared up at the undercarriage of the RV, so that he could see the door to the warehouse in his peripheral vision, but indirectly enough that he wasn't looking at the bodies.

This wasn't a good angle, on those doors. He should get out from under the RV, and take up the position behind the engine block. He could be upright that way, have decent cover, and a clear view of the doors. It was always easier to hit someone you were shooting at, when you were upright.

He didn't move. He started trembling instead, little tremors in his hands becoming full-body shaking. He tried to tell himself to stop it, that it was too early for this part, that he wasn't safe yet.

The blood pooling under the enemy alpha's corpse was starting to trickle with the slope of the ground. Max felt the wetness against his calf, but he couldn't make himself move.

More footsteps above him, more yelling. He gathered himself enough to click the safety back on, because in this condition he could well pull the trigger by accident. He might as well shove the gun back into the messenger bag, it wasn't like he was going to be able to aim and shoot like this. He couldn't make himself do that either, though. He kept his slick grip on it, anyways.

He flinched badly when the door to the warehouse banged open once more, but he couldn't even force himself to turn his head enough to properly look. If he did, he would be facing the bodies, and Max just couldn't. He knew them by smell anyways, a second later: Nick, Isaac, Johnny, and Wes. The rest of his pack, alive. They weren't running, either, weren't acting as if they were being pursued. Max knew what that meant, for the other members of the enemy pack who had been inside the warehouse.

MAX! More yelling. More stomping, people piling into and then out of the RV.

Where is he? You said he was here!

He was just here, I just saw him, he had a fucking gun–

MAX!

It only took a few seconds, for Nick to crouch down to check under the RV. *Hey,* he said, tone ragged but relieved. *Hey, Max, Max, it's okay. Come here, come here to me.*

Max couldn't move. He wasn't sure why he couldn't move, except for the shaking that wouldn't stop. His hands had shaken about this badly, after he killed his last pack. But he hadn't been paralyzed like this.

Okay. It's okay, I got you. Nick was lying on the bloody ground now too, scooting himself halfway under the RV, and putting an arm around Max. *Okay. Fuck, okay. I'm going to pull you out, okay? I'm sorry, but we really, really need to get out of here.*

He grabbed Max, and then the spell of frozeness broke, and Max was once again fighting as he was dragged. The alpha hauled him out from under the RV and to his feet, while Max twisted and kicked. He was pressed up against the side of the RV, and there were hands all over, tearing at his clothes–

Where you hit? Max? Max? Where you hit, baby?

Holy fucking shit, that's a lot of blood.

Where'd he get shot, did you see it?

I didn't see shit, I didn't see–is that his blood?

Max needed them all off of him, needed the alpha to stop fucking touching him. Almost as a reflex, he brought the gun up, and pressed the muzzle into the alpha's chest.

The frantic chatter died, and Max had the thought that it hadn't just died, he'd killed it the same way he'd killed Kelly. He tried to focus his gaze on the man in front of him. Max was

still shaking. It got worse when he met Nick's eyes, and the panic was tempered by recognition, and then by horror.

He was pointing a loaded gun at his own alpha.

He thought about it, for a moment, because if he killed Nick, Nick would never have the chance to punish Max for this.

Nick slowly put his hands in the air, and took a step back. *Johnny, go back in the RV. Isaac–*

Don't you dare, Isaac whispered. He pitched his voice soft. *Hey, baby boy, I know. This has been a really, epically bad day. Can you please put the gun down, and come inside the RV, and let us stop the bleeding, from wherever you're hit? Please, honey, please.*

Max was making a sound, from his throat. He needed to put the gun down. He was going to put the gun down, any second now. He wasn't going to shoot Nick, he already knew that. Nick did not deserve that. Max believed that. He also knew that the consequences for this were going to fall just as soon as he dropped the gun, and he didn't know what more he could take, right now. They could kill him for this, and hadn't he just thoroughly proved he wasn't the good little omega he'd been playing at? They were *seeing* him now, seeing what he really was, for the first time. Max understood what he really was, to be something other people felt compelled to break.

They already had him, he had nothing to offer them to make this okay. He did it at the same time, dropping the gun and the gesture of submission: he went to his knees, letting the gun clatter to the pavement. He put his arms up to protect his head.

Max gasped at the first touch, which was Isaac's hand on his shoulder. Isaac got down next to him, and pulled Max into his arms. Max let his own arms fall around Isaac's shoulders, gripping him. He flinched when Nick moved, but then Nick's face was level with Max's and Isaac's, because he'd knelt too. Max couldn't parse this, had only ever seen alphas kneel when another alpha had forced them to it. Then he was in Nick's arms too, as Nick embraced the both of them, and this was so achingly familiar. This, the closeness that horrified him as much as he craved it, pressed between the two leaders of the pack, was how he spent every night since joining them, sleepless or restful. He felt himself collapse into it.

They got him up, after a few moments. Half carried him onto the RV. Logan was lying on the floor in the aisle that ran down the middle of the RV, Johnny crouching over him putting pressure on his gut wound. Pete was sitting in the passenger seat, and Wes was helping him bandage his head. Isaac and Nick lifted Max over the little table, to lay him down in the booth.

Bleeding control, when you find the wound. Treat for shock, Pete said, after a glance. *Blankets, elevate his legs. Nothing by mouth.*

I know how to treat for shock, Isaac said, distractedly. He carefully removed Max's messenger bag. *Bleeding control–we need to–Wes, can you–yes, thank you.*

They turned a five-gallon bucket on its side, covered it in a blanket, and used it to prop up Max's legs like a kind of ramp. Wes wrote to ask Max where he was shot, which didn't make any sense. Max was still trembling too much to write, so he just shook his head. They got it, eventually, after several rounds of guessing and head shaking: it wasn't Max's blood.

After that, they smothered him in blankets, and Max looked on, completely detached, as they performed what looked like a full surgery on Logan on the floor of the RV. At some point, Max was aware that the RV was moving, and the relief almost but didn't quite cut through the numbness.

Isaac was there. Isaac was holding his hand, was pressing a kiss to his temple. Isaac with tears tracking from the corners of his eyes, Isaac with his hand carding through Max's hair.

The fatigue washed over him almost gently, little lapping waves of exhaustion as he wove back and forth over the strandline of consciousness, until the tide pulled him under.

When he woke, it was dark, the interior of the RV lit only by the flickering light of a nearby campfire. He was warm, still swaddled in blankets on the bench with his legs propped up. His messenger bag was tucked against his side, and Logan was asleep on the floor, similarly wrapped in blankets. A low sound caught his attention, the unmistakable scent of sex heavy in the air.

It was Nick and Isaac this time, Max could tell that much. He couldn't help but be baffled, as he woke properly and was able to listen, that Nick would want to fuck his omega at a time like this. Max couldn't think of anything less sexy than having to kill your way out of a warehouse and then perform floor surgery on your horribly injured packmate.

Yes, you're going to take it for me, Isaac was crooning, *just like that.*

Isaac didn't sound or smell like he was in pain, or like he was afraid. Something was off, though. The lust wafting through the RV was making Max slightly dizzy, and he couldn't put his finger on the source of the off-ness.

There we go, ass up. Spread your legs, that's it. Good boy. So good for me, aren't you? Listening to Isaac whisper to Nick was doing something to Max, even though he couldn't understand the words. Max had seen plenty of omegas used before and largely found it horrible, but Isaac's voice was rich and warm and encouraging. He sounded so composed and self-possessed. *You ready?*

Please, I need you, Nick gasped, his voice wrecked. For the first time, Max understood that Isaac was having an effect on Nick, in their intimacy. Not just the normal way, about alphas not being able to control themselves around omegas. Nick let out a long, muffled moan, and it was because Isaac was drawing it out of him, creating it.

Breathe, love, breathe. Isaac made a satisfied kind of hiss, and Nick actually whined. Max held his breath. He'd never heard an alpha make a sound like that before, and that it was coming from Nick, for Isaac, sent a pulse between Max's own legs. Well, shit, he had to get out of this RV, then, before they realized he was awake and spying on them.

He stayed put, now fully awake and straining to listen. *So tight, so tense,* Isaac was murmuring. *My poor darling. You're going to let go for me now, aren't you? You did so well today, you know. The whole pack made it, we're all here. You did that, and I'm so proud of you. And you're going to let go now. I insist.*

Nick moaned, and Max started to carefully slide himself around the curved C of the booth, disentangling from the blankets as quietly as possible. Because he had to leave, he shouldn't be here, shouldn't be listening to whatever this was, with Isaac composed and Nick a wreck. Nick was making little gasps now, every few seconds, and Max was leaving, he was definitely leaving, he was peeking around the end of the booth to look down the short hallway to the bedroom at the back of the RV.

It took a long minute to even understand what he was looking at. Nick was on his knees, legs spread with his ass in the air, his face pressed to the mattress. One arm by his head, bracing himself, the other curled up behind his back. Isaac was kneeling up behind him, pinning Nick's wrist to the small of his back with one hand, the other hand gripping his hip. It was a profoundly submissive position, and had they been reversed Max wouldn't have looked twice. As it was, he couldn't look away, and it took long seconds of watching Isaac rocking his hips forward, drawing gasps from Nick, for what he was seeing to even be legible: Isaac was fucking Nick.

It was–it couldn't be inconceivable, because he was watching it happen. There were so many layers to this that Max couldn't parse. This couldn't be a punishment of some kind, that wasn't the atmosphere at all. Clearly Nick wanted this, he was the pack alpha, Isaac couldn't have managed this against Nick's will. Nick was bracing himself, pushing back to meet Isaac's slow, shallow thrusts, gasping into the mattress.

Please, Nick whined, drawing out the syllables. *More. Isaac, please. Faster.*

No, love, Isaac said, and Max watched his fingers flex as he kneaded his grip on Nick's hip. *We're going slow tonight. You're so tense, so sensitive. You need to be unwound. You're going to take everything I give you, so I can take you apart. That includes my pace.*

Max was hard, watching them. He felt the pressure in his body, his own rising arousal, but it felt like they were all in some suspended world together. What was happening seemed so unlikely, so impossible, that in the faint flickering light of the campfire outside the RV, it was almost otherworldly.

Minutes of this, of Isaac's slow rocking, of Nick whimpering and fisting the blankets with his free hand. Eventually Isaac let out a deep sigh, and pressed his hips flush with Nick's. At first Max thought he might have come, but he realized that he'd just bottomed out. That in and of itself was incredible; when Max submitted like this, whoever was using him typically seated himself in a handful of thrusts, and Max just had to work through the pain. Max had had plenty of sex where the whole thing lasted less time than Isaac had taken, to work Nick open.

It had to be some kind of game, Max thought. Isaac wasn't bigger and stronger than Nick, that he could really be pinning him in place. Nick could just get up if he wanted to. And Nick wasn't forcing Isaac to play the dominant role, either, that much was clear. Isaac was calm, sure of his control. Which surely he only had because Nick was letting him have it, but–

Please, Nick moaned. His toes were curling. *I need your hand, please.*

No, beloved, Isaac said, and he was enjoying this, Max could hear it in his voice. He pulled almost all the way out, and pushed back in, punching out another gasp from Nick. *I think you need to focus on my cock right now, not yours. I want you good and sore, before we're done. Do you think you need to cry tonight?*

Please, Nick said. *I need you, I need you.*

I know, my love. I'm right here, I got you. Isaac's pace changed. Still slow, but now his thrusts were long and deep. Max actually felt himself twitch, as Nick's answering moan was partially stifled by the blankets.

Max was so turned on, and so confused. He hadn't known that alphas did this, that omegas did *that.* Max had never had sex where he was the one doing the penetrating, and it hadn't occurred to him that it was a real option. His thoughts were running wild, and the blankets halfway around him were much too hot.

Taking ahold of his messenger bag, Max slid out of the booth, and carefully stepped over where Logan was sleeping, as quietly as possible. His thoughts were racing, and if he stayed in here, he risked them smelling his own arousal. He didn't want to deal with that, just yet.

He waited in the tiny stairwell by the door until Isaac finally sped up, snapping his hips into Nick's while the pack alpha braced and squirmed and buried his bitten-off wails into the mattress. Then he slipped out the door.

The others were around the campfire, and he avoided them, going around the back side of the RV and into the woods. He went far enough to be out of scent range, hidden in the shadows of overlapping branches, and then he braced one arm against a tree, and took his own cock out of his pants.

The frigid night air almost set him back to square one, but he was already so close just watching Nick and Isaac. He squeezed his eyes shut, and worked himself with his hand, replaying it in his mind. Nick, flushed and teary-eyed, pinned in place, giving his submission to an omega. Isaac, smoothly controlling the alpha beneath him, at ease with his dominance in spite of his designation. It put him over the edge quickly, like nothing ever had before.

Max breathed, leaning heavily against the tree, letting the cold seep into him, once he was done. He tucked himself away, and kicked leaf litter over the spend on the ground, taking a moment before going back to camp.

There was so much dried blood. He scrubbed at the dark splotches on his hands, without remembering what they were at first. Then the disgust crept over him, that the first time he'd gotten off in weeks, it had been with the blood of the men he'd killed still all over him.

He slinked back into camp, once he was sure the arousal had dissipated from his scent. There was a steaming pot on the fire, and Pete was stirring it absently. Johnny and Wes were cuddled together, sitting on one of two logs that had been arranged around the firepit, as seats.

Hey Max! They looked happy to see him, and wasn't that insane, after everything. After they knew him to be a killer, not some meek little omega.

Johnny waved for Max to come over, and made the hand gesture for wanting to write something. Max obliged, taking out both the pack notebook for him, and the sketchbook for himself.

Did Nick and Isaac wake you up? Johnny said.

Yeah, Max responded. Surely the rest of the pack already knew, about…he didn't even know what to call it, the sex happening in the trailer right now.

Johnny gave him one of his looks, the kind that made Max a little uncomfortable sometimes, like Johnny knew what Max was thinking.

Oh shit we might all die on the job = Nick tops

Oh shit we didn't all die on the job = Isaac tops

Just part of their regular thing. It won't seem strange after awhile.

I've never, Max said, and then stopped there, because he didn't know how to finish the sentence.

Yeah, Johnny said, nodding. **I think you and I had more of a similar upbringing. I had a whole learning curve when I joined this pack. As long as you can be chill about consenting adults doing what works for them, there won't be any problems.**

It hadn't occurred to Max, to be unchill about it. Well, maybe going to touch himself in the woods wasn't exactly 'chill.' It hadn't occurred to him to have a negative opinion of Nick or Isaac, for what they were doing.

Johnny said, **Did you know it's New Year's Eve? I'd completely lost track, but Pete has a watch, and we're counting down. About twenty minutes to go. You want some soup?**

Max nodded, and Pete ladled a steaming bowl full for him. Rich broth and tender vegetables, with red beans. Miniscule chunks of what he guessed was chicken. This was at least partially from their canned goods stock, then.

In two weeks of meals that were the best things Max had eaten in years, this was the best yet. He was so hungry, and he tried to pace himself, savoring the carrots, the onions, the celery, the potatoes. It was so salty, and so hot, he could feel it warming him from the inside. He couldn't get enough, and Pete had to write him a note promising seconds if he didn't get a stomach ache.

When Max went to put his notebook back, as the others watched the minutes tick down on Pete's watch, he actually looked at the contents of his bag, for the first time since waking. He'd grabbed the notebooks out earlier without noticing, but now he took inventory, his eyes going wet.

His notebooks, of course, were still there. His canteen and knife, confiscated when he'd joined the pack, were there. The protein bars he'd stolen, and been so afraid of being caught with, remained in place. There were two guns, now, the empty one he'd had when he joined, and the one he'd stolen from Kelly's stash, and used to kill the enemy alpha. He could tell from the weight that neither of them were loaded, but the separated magazine from Kelly's gun was in the bag, too, still half full of bullets.

And Kelly's gift. Max pulled out the item wrapped in brown paper, a very battered book in a homemade protective cover. He opened it to the title page, and felt the tears gathering in his eyes spill over. The Concise American Sign Language Dictionary, with a note scrawled in red pen that Max instantly recognized as Kelly's handwriting.

Hi Max!

I hope you'll get to keep this, and that you can use it. I know my pack has a lot of drama going on, but you'll be okay. I think you'll get along with my dam, I know he'll be happy to learn ASL to talk with you, and he'll make sure you get food. I'll come see you as much as I can.

Take care,

Kelly

He snapped the book shut, gripping it in his hands. Max couldn't explain why this, now, was the thing that broke him down, after all of it. The double-edged nature of the gesture, a profound gift paired with the intent of violence and deprivation. That this lived in his bag now, alongside the food and weapons his new pack now trusted him with, instead of punishing him for daring to possess. He'd been asleep with this bag earlier. They'd let him sleep armed, after he'd killed in front of them, after he'd pointed the gun at Nick.

Johnny shuffled close, and when Max leaned into him, he put an arm around him. Held him up, while Max cried into his shoulder, and the seconds ticked down to the new year.

Chapter End Notes

<3 We're done, but I also said that before & it wasn't true, so you never know. I read every comment, even if I don't always have the spoons to reply. If you want to join the

server Coffee and I operate and come yell with us, you're invited, just be prepared for a lot of All For The Game: https://discord.gg/Jaeb8wknzF

Works inspired by this one

Fighting Fears by Anonymous

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!